

Escapism in *12 Strong* (2018): Influence of the Vietnam War on Post-1991 Media, How the “Vietnam Syndrome”
Has Endured

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American soldiers with the latest American military tech of the early 21st century, used the same vehicle as the Mongols in Afghanistan eight hundred years prior, horses. This is the picture director Nicolai Fuglsig paints in the 2018 American film *12 Strong*, a true story of 12 U.S. Army Special Forces members' mission to capture Maza-I-Sharif, Afghanistan, at the beginning of the American invasion.

12 Strong adds to the long history of American War films. War films were significantly impacted by the loss in Vietnam. The U.S. had taken its first significant defeat in a war that would foreshadow several more defeats in Laos, Cambodia, and Cuba; America had lost its prestige as an invincible state, able to liberate France, conquer Japanese islands, and annex swaths of the American continent. This left a stain on the history of American exceptionalism, bringing with it a cultural shift away from nationalistic sentiments. Coined as "Vietnam syndrome," the conflict changed how America viewed itself.

Media began to confront the realities of war as painful, regrettable acts, removing the glory that prior art had presented. This new media era confronted what had happened to America's youth in the jungles of Vietnam. Some, however, believe that Vietnam syndrome is cured. After the overwhelming victory of the United States in the Gulf war, then President George H. W. Bush proclaimed, "By God, we've kicked the Vietnam syndrome once and for all!"¹ The question remains whether this was the first in a line of premature jubilant declarations by Presidents Bushs or the outcome of a thoughtful analysis of American sentiments.

Fuglsig's presentation of *12 Strong* provides insight into current sentiments, triumphing over many of the teachings of the war in Vietnam. By delivering an escapist interpretation of warfare, employing plot devices and combat motifs from early Vietnam cinema to a degree, the syndrome has been cured, leaving syndrome-esque devices behind, but lingering symptoms remain considering the film's reception.

Full Metal Jacket, Stanley Kubrick's 1987 interpretation of the American war in Vietnam, is a classic presentation of what the Vietnam syndrome entails. A confrontational piece, the film tells the story of a drafted marine nicknamed Joker. This two-part film presents the horrors of marine corps boot camp and the terrors of fighting against the Tet offensive.

¹ E.J. Dionne Jr. 1991. "KICKING the 'VIETNAM SYNDROME.'" The Washington Post, March 4, 1991. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1991/03/04/kicking-the-vietnam-syndrome/b6180288-4b9e-4d5f-b303-befa2275524d/>.

Kubrick's exploration of the human condition in *Full Metal Jacket* is powerful, and he does not shy away from the brutal realities of war and its effect on those who participate in it. The film is a powerful commentary on the nature of war and the human condition. Kubrick provides the fabric necessary to analyze modern films through a Vietnam lens.

The stance films took on war itself changed drastically during the post-Vietnam era; *Full Metal Jacket*, although anti-war on the surface, holds a neutral stance. Many critics, however, take a different position on Kubrick's work.

Rua Fay writing for *Cinemasters*, concludes in their analysis of why the film is misinterpreted as pro-war, "Despite being one of the most obvious anti-war and anti-military films of all time, why does Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* get so much praise from militarists and Republicans? On the surface, it is a straight-forward war movie about a Marine's journey ... but anyone who looks deeper than that will see that ... this film is not only a critique of war itself but the American military as a whole."²

Fray is missing that films are inherently pro-war. The visual medium gains itself to the glorification of combat. Commonly attributed to French director Francois Truffault the quote "there's no such thing as an anti-war film," exemplifies this argument. The tools used in a war film to hone the anti-war message also show the thrill, the action, the comradery.

By using the medium of a war film, Kubrick sacrifices his staunch anti-war message. An anti-war film that incites 18-year-olds to enlist in the marines does not achieve its goal. James Clark, a marine corps veteran attributes his enlistment to the first scene with Hartman, of *FMJ*. "The entire seven-minute scene is one prolonged dive into depravity, pain, and verbal abuse, with Hartman performing like a virtuoso whose medium is profanity... it also felt a little bit like a dare: Could I deal with that?"³

² Fay, Rua. 2021. "The Genius and Frequently Misunderstood Politics of 'Full Metal Jacket.'" *Cinemasters*. January 25, 2021. <https://www.cinemasters.net/post/the-genius-and-frequently-misunderstood-politics-of-full-metal-jacket>.

³ Clark, James. 2020. "That One Scene in 'Full Metal Jacket' That Convinced a Lot of Young Marines to Enlist in the First Place." 2020. *Task & Purpose*. September 11, 2020. <https://taskandpurpose.com/news/full-metal-jacket-marine-corps-boot-camp-scene/>.

Even though Kubrick's intentions of de-glorifying Marine training, it was not the glory that some sought in war, it was the challenge, the adventure, a break from conformity. For this, *Full Metal Jacket* delivered with over-the-top scenes of something different.

Although the film is not strictly anti-war, Kubrick directs a film that firstly de-glorifies what being a marine entails. This confrontation of what being a soldier is, sharply contrasts the pre-syndromed representation. Pvt. Pyle commits suicide after shooting his drill instructor Gny. Sgt. Hartman, ending the first half of Kubrick's dualistic story. This climactic moment confronts the heroic portrayals of marines. The effects of not even war but being broken down and formed into a "killing machine" as the film phrases it is utterly human. War is no longer a far-off event, one and done, but an activity that has human consequences.

Another aspect of confrontational media is the murkiness of war. Joker epitomizes this conflict. He wears on his helmet "BORN TO KILL" but on his chest a peace sign button. Joker explains this to a commanding officer as the "duality of man," but this analysis goes past the individual. Kubrick comments on war itself, the U.S. commits violence to achieve peace; communism is entrenched in the nation through U.S. opposition; regulars in South Vietnam fight that same army on the weekend. There is a level of irony to everything Vietnam.

These themes developed in the Vietnam lens sharply contrast the industry's prior work.

In contrast, *The Green Berets* (1968) is an escapist picture of the war in Vietnam that follows two teams of Green Berets as they perform missions in South Vietnam. An uncritical interpretation of the war, director and star John Wayne, glorifies fighting for the American cause. This piece epitomizes what escapist media is; telling a straight history of conflict before the onset of post-Vietnam sentiments, similarity to this reading acts as a test of whether those sentiments have lifted.

Escapist media does not seek to develop criticism or debate in a topic but instead to bolster a positive view of oneself; to escape debate and enjoy the bliss of surety. An escapist piece of media is unable to present the horrors of war for all belligerents, therefore it must present their side as superior; guaranteed to win a conflict.

The Green Berets accomplished this feat through the presentation of the helicopter mounted rockets wiping out a group of Vietcong. Wayne offers a scene of Green Berets flying over the forest spotting a large group of Vietcong regulars. This group attempts to take down the helicopter with small arms fire to no effect. The Green Berets

then fire several rockets eliminating the group. This depiction does not show the horrors of the conflict entailed by American soldiers dying in direct combat. The presentation of overwhelming force prevents any debate over the war.

12 Strong, the film will be used to compare escapist and confrontational sentiments was released after the core combat in the war in Afghanistan. *12 Strong* recounts the first U.S. Special Forces deployment to the mountainous nation, inaugurating the 20-year conflict. The film uses many of the same plot points and motifs of early depictions of the conflict.

Just like Wayne, Fuglsig begins his film with the same unambiguous presentations of the motivations behind their mission. The first scene sets *12 Strong* on September eleventh, 2001. While moving into his new home, the protagonist, Captain Mitch Nelson, discovers that the Twin Towers had been hit in a terrorist attack. This event is referenced habitually throughout the film to justify the soldiers' motivation to fight.

Wayne, although similar, takes a more aggressive approach to the justification for war. The film's first scene is a fictional press conference held by the U.S. army, where the journalists grill the Green Berets, who make witty responses, glorify the military, and reprimand the journalists as anti-freedom and anti-American for questioning the war.

Both films take an uncritical and escapist view of their wars. Neither film questions whether these actions would achieve their goals. In both conflicts, the enemy would in the end win. Although they differ slightly in the delivery, their message is the same: the straight representation as to why the conflict is occurring is correct and just. *12 Strong* is adopting an escapist and uncritical view of the conflict just as *the Green Berets* had in 1968.

Unquestioning of the effectiveness of an invasion of Afghanistan, *12 Strong*, accepts the straight history of Afghanistan. Both films read less like an inciting incident but a propagandist piece to convince the audience why the war is meaningful.

12 Strong may also have some confrontational elements according to Manohla Dargis writing for the *New York Times*, who describes the raison d'être of *12 Strong*, "Winning and losing aren't the point of '12 Strong,' and

neither are politics, the present, the past, the United States or Afghanistan. Its reason for being is brotherhood, a belief and way of life.”⁴

This may have been the original goal of those involved in the production, however, the product presented to audiences falls short of this purpose. The flat, over masculinized characters that are portrayed are unable to fulfill any theme involving emotionality. In a film whose inciting incident is to gain revenge, it is difficult to see the *raison d'être* ever being brotherhood. These soldiers are far too invested in the goals of the conflict to be fighting for each other. With lines like, “the only way home is winning,”⁵ the conflict is inseparable from the group’s survival.

When analyzing the effect of the Vietnam syndrome the reception of the film must be mentioned. *12 Strong*’s reception can only be noted as one word: underwhelming. Released in January of 2018 the film ended the year number 67, the highest grossing war-picture of the year.⁶ The other two films analyzed in this essay, however, ranked in the top 25, each grossing more than double what *12 Strong* earned adjusted for inflation. This shows that perhaps the film did not reflect what wider audiences believed.

This is manifested too in the critical reviews. Christy Lemire views the shortfall as its lack of “narrative momentum.”⁷ This is true, the film lacks a strong compelling narrative, however, this analysis should go further. The narrative issues are not the cause but a symptom. Because the film is meant to tell the straight story, which it does well, it is unable to present the ambiguity that made post-Vietnam films what they were. Instead of an art being in the eye of the beholder, a narrative is given to the viewer.

The same irony that allows *Full Metal Jacket* to be interpreted as a pro-war film is what makes the film a success; lacking that irony, *12 Strong* is unable to provide a compelling narrative structure, because it would undermine the glorification of war. A film that would have been of great success in 1968 is divided in 2018. America has not recovered from the Vietnam syndrome; the cough has only been suppressed.

It's been over 40 years since the Vietnam War ended, but its effects are still felt today. The conflict was America's first major military defeat, and it had a profound impact on the country's national psyche. In the years

⁴ Dargis, Manohla. 2018. “Review: ‘12 Strong’ Believes in the Brotherhood of Battle.” *The New York Times*, January 18, 2018, sec. Movies. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/18/movies/12-strong-review-chris-hemsworth.html>.

⁵ Fuglsig, Nicolai, dir. 2018. *12 Strong* Film. Warner Bros.

⁶ “The Numbers - Top-Grossing Movies of 2018.” n.d. *The Numbers*. <https://www.the-numbers.com/market/2018/top-grossing-movies>.

⁷ Lemire, Christy. n.d. “12 Strong Movie Review & Film Summary (2018) | Roger Ebert.” <https://www.rogerebert.com/>. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/12-strong-2018>.

since, the US has experienced significant events that spurred nationalistic pride, such as the victory in the Cold War, military superiority in the middle east and the 9/11 terrorist attacks. However, the shadow of Vietnam still looms large in the American consciousness. Can an event so pivotal in history be forgotten? The effects have weakened but have also overcome several momentous events. Perhaps it will continue to morph as similar events appear.

The United States is still affected by the Vietnam Syndrome, which has an impact not only domestically but also globally. As a result, the country remains reluctant to participate in military combat. In the same decade Full Metal Jacket was released, Argentina invaded the Falklands; the lack of a significant American response has been attributed to the nation's unwillingness to fight in imperial conflicts. The Vietnam Syndrome prevented the US from defending British sovereignty and has also inhibited action in the war in Ukraine, as the nation is afraid of entering another ground war, despite having the world's largest military.

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