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Film Is Like a Battleground: Sam Fuller's War Movies by
Marsha Gordon (review)

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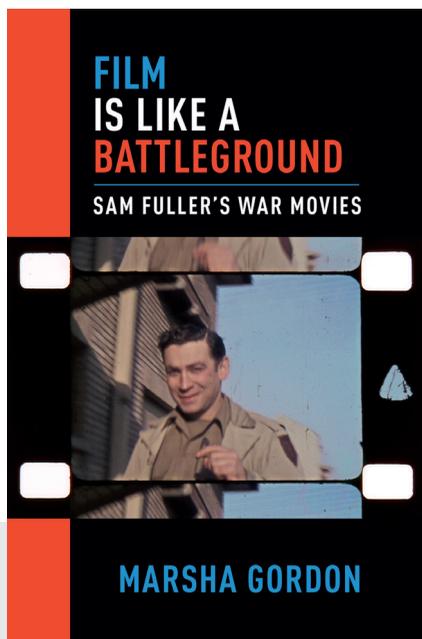


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Quarterly, and *Public Library Quarterly*. He is also the lead author of the American Library Association report *Rural Libraries in the United States: Recent Strides, Future Possibilities, and Meeting Community Needs* and editor of the book *Rural and Small Public Libraries: Challenges and Opportunities*, both published in 2017.

Books



Film Is Like a Battleground: Sam Fuller's War Movies

BY MARSHA GORDON
OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2017

Donald Crafton

A bedrock tenet of the auteur theory was that directors' lifetime work eventually was an analog of their intelligence, their character, their belief system, their human essence. Therefore their oeuvres could be reverse-engineered to discover the creative being embedded within. As Marsha Gordon forcefully demonstrates, this strategy doesn't work with Samuel Fuller.

Despite the efforts to use the film work and his appearances in films as talismans of his politics and personality, at the end of the story, the "real" Sam Fuller remains enigmatic, contradictory, and impacted. Perhaps Fuller should be considered a *faux-auteur*. As Gordon argues, he spent forty years of his career basically making one ur-film, the one that became *The Big Red One* (1980), so we have the mandatory obsessive consistency of vision. We have an authorial style that emerged fully formed in *The Steel Helmet* (1951): too-close close-ups, rapid cutting, expansive mise-en-scène. There is the recurring subject, war, and the familiar character, the tragic outsider, the unappreciated foot soldier, the doggy. But after all that, we still cannot discern the mirror image in the analog. Who was Sam Fuller, and what was he trying to say? To her credit, Gordon doesn't try to answer. Early on, she acknowledges the conundrum inherent in her subject's work, the "bluntness of Fuller's style and the stylishness of Fuller's bluntness" (vii). Fuller's vision of war was paradoxical. While he supported warfare as necessary and mythologized it, he also condemned it as "organized insanity" and absurd. As a result, his films were received with confusion, being perceived as pro- and antiwar, delivering both communist and fascist messages. Gordon presents the historical record but refuses to settle the question for us. "I have no desire," she states, "to try to sniff out Fuller's 'true politics,' to find a consistent and singular political idea or perspective that can be discerned from the body of his films. This has been the pursuit of many a critic, studio representative, and politician—and it is an impossible aim. . . . My aim was never to present a coherent sense of Fuller's politics" (21, 255).

Accordingly, instead of "reading" the films inductively, Gordon directs her effort toward getting behind the scenes. For instance, she begins with the astounding revelation that Samuel Fuller was not born in Massachusetts in 1912, as he had always claimed, but arrived in Maine as Michal Filler with his Russian Jewish family in 1913, having been born abroad in 1911. Fuller never acknowledged that he was an immigrant, nor did he ever become a citizen through formal naturalization as far as we know. Gordon hypothesizes that the exploits of Fuller's film protagonists are obviously

distillations of the director's war experiences, but on a deeper level, they reveal the anxieties of an outsider's desire to assimilate: "Fuller's foreign-born status, alongside his justifiable, lifelong insistence on his Americanness and his passionate sense of patriotism, is significant. Why he chose not to disclose his immigration (presuming he was aware of it) is unclear, but he expressed precisely the kind of enthusiasm for being an American, for American history, and for American freedoms that is not unusual for an immigrant eager to demonstrate his connection to his country, rather than a citizen resting comfortably on an entitled-by-birth identity" (26).

Film Is Like a Battleground—the title derives from a line Fuller speaks in his cameo in Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le fou* (1965)—meticulously sorts through the available records related to the production of the war-themed films made between 1945 and the documentary in which he participated, *Falkenau, the Impossible* (dir. Emil Weiss, 1988). She proceeds deductively, building her research from the archives up. She also references and corrects, when necessary, previous scholarship. Her work supplements and generously cites the definitive monograph on Fuller by Lisa Dombrowski.¹ Throughout the book, we are surprised by the quantity of heretofore unknown or neglected source materials she uncovers.

For example, she relates the moment of which every archives researcher dreams: recognizing previously unknown or misidentified footage. This happened while going through the films that the estate had deposited in the Motion Picture Academy archives. Her eureka moment came when she realized that seven incorrectly labeled reels were "archival gems" that Fuller shot as "location-scouting footage for *The Big Red One* in the 1950s, making them the only surviving 35mm footage shot for the project nearly thirty years before it was actually completed" (222–24). The discovery suggests that Fuller already conceived his masterwork as reclaimed memory: "These images are . . . confrontations in and of themselves with war trauma—a working through, a remembering, a revisitation, and a looking past or forward that is literally facilitated by the camera and its role as both personal device and professional tool"

(229). The existence of these films augments Gordon's extended analysis of Fuller's private 16mm films and provides strong evidence that his war movies were efforts, consciously or otherwise, to heal, or at least to articulate, the posttraumatic stress that haunts his most personal works.

Because this issue of *The Moving Image* focuses on the work of teaching in the archival context, it's appropriate to point out that *Film Is Like a Battleground*, besides being a highly readable and cogently written analysis of the director's war films, is archetypal as a potential textbook. Gordon shows us how to base our writing on factual, authentic sources and how to weave these empirical findings into a work of historiography and humanities scholarship. While any section could serve as a case study, chapter 2, "A Complicated Conflict: *The Steel Helmet & Fixed Bayonets!*," reveals the amount of spadework that can (indeed, must) be done to add depth, color, and understanding to media works. For this one chapter, which treats two films, she utilizes these resources to lay the groundwork. Published secondary sources are referenced critically, remedying them as needed, as well as Fuller's notebooks and diaries, which have been available to previous scholars, but not as thoroughly incorporated into the presentation. At the University of Southern California, she used the Warner Bros. archives, the press book collection, and the Fox legal collection. In the archives of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences Margaret Herrick Library, she consulted the "core" collection, the Fuller collection, the Motion Picture Association of America papers, and the papers of producer Robert L. Lippert. At the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), she checked the House Un-American Activities Committee Investigative Name files and the Pictorial Branch files of the U.S. State Department's Office of Public Information. Using a Freedom of Information Act request, she obtained the FBI files on Fuller, some of which had been personally annotated by J. Edgar Hoover. This is in addition to studying the films' reception in outlets as disparate as the Armed Services' *Stars and Stripes* to the Communist Party's *Daily Worker*, as well as the usual motion picture trade journals. And, of course, she looked at the trove of film prints

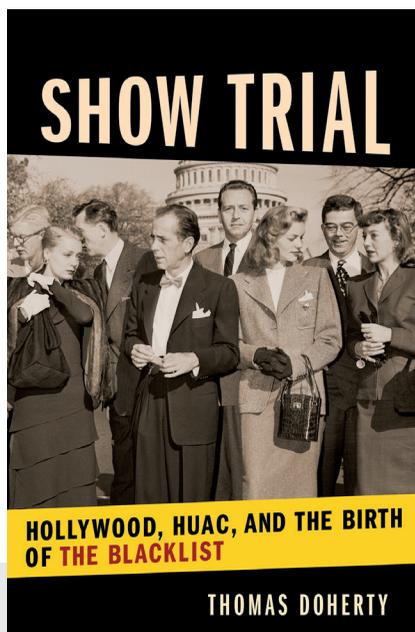
in the Academy Film Archive. The result is a magnificently documented study that reveals for the first time the troubled production and the wildly diverse and confusing reception of these two extraordinary films.

But the idea that lingers is the paradox that Gordon identifies as central to understanding Fuller's war-themed films. As she reiterates, anyone wishing to assign the flag of one side or another to him as an auteur or a politico will be thwarted. Could it be, though, that the paradox that is Sam Fuller is the key to understanding why his films are important and representative of their times? It may be that their author was one in a group that demonstrated, or were victims of, a specific postwar disturbance in which faith in martial masculinity was being chipped away, when social and ideological values were growing out of sync, when suspicion of communism was replacing communitas and the rationale for fighting just wars was being jettisoned to conduct ignominious undeclared skirmishes rooted in politics, not patriotism. One thinks of certain "Kennedy men" of Fuller's generation who became Nixon defenders. Perhaps we can visualize Fuller as melding these extreme contradictions—Burt Lancaster and John Wayne in one person. As such, the image of Fuller that emerges from *Film Is Like a Battleground* as a man who was patriotic, but traumatized and questioning, might have been more typical and coherent than we now assume—paradoxical, yes, but representative of a class who were extremely self-conscious of their Americanness. They were pugnacious and resistant, loudly asserting I did it my way, while evading their own deep doubts about whether that way was right.

Donald Crafton is coeditor of *The Moving Image*. In 2019, he received the Distinguished Career Achievement Award from the Society of Cinema and Media Studies and the Jean Mitry Prize from the Pordenone Silent Film Festival.

NOTE

1. Lisa Dombrowski, *The Films of Samuel Fuller: If You Die, I'll Kill You!* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 2008).



Show Trial: Hollywood, HUAC, and the Birth of the Blacklist

BY THOMAS DOHERTY

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2018

Christine D'Auria

Thomas Doherty's *Show Trial: Hollywood, HUAC, and the Birth of the Blacklist* takes a deep dive into 1947, when the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) undertook its most public hearings on alleged Communist subversion in Hollywood. In the process, HUAC profoundly shaped our lexicon for discussing, analyzing, and remembering the postwar Red Scare and its notorious cultural counterpart, the Hollywood blacklist. In 1947, HUAC, chaired by J. Parnell Thomas, called on an extraordinary range of film industry professionals to testify, establishing the now-familiar factions of "Friendly" and "Unfriendly" witnesses. The former camp included individuals like then-actor Ronald Reagan, whose later political career would be bolstered by his proven commitment to a zero-tolerance policy toward Communists. The latter formed perhaps the most iconic grouping to emerge from the investigations: the Unfriendly Nineteen, which would be