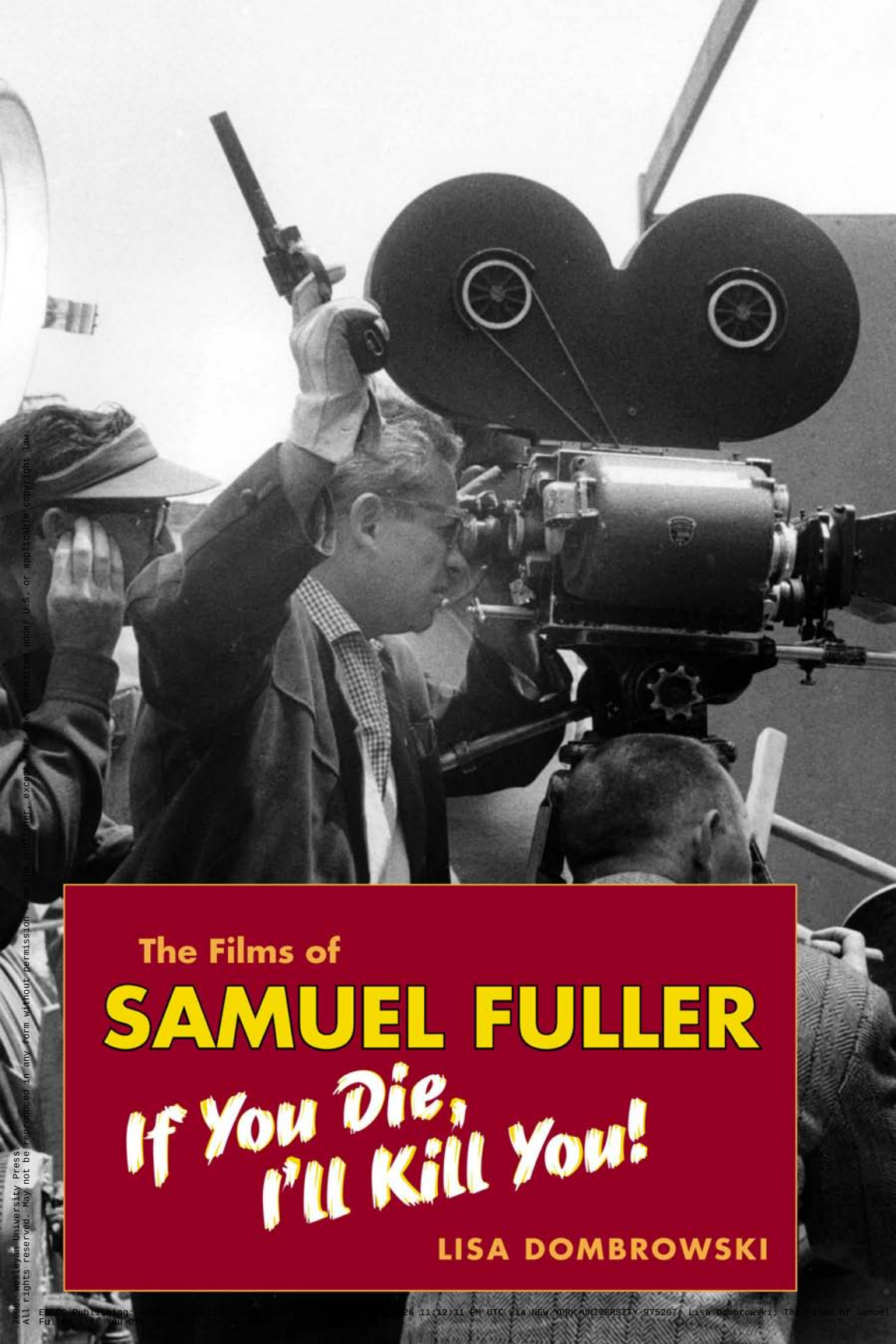




The Films of
SAMUEL FULLER

*If You Die,
I'll Kill You!*

LISA DOMBROWSKI

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Introduction



man eyes a woman on the subway. She returns his gaze. Two other men watch. A pocketbook is picked.

An outlaw shoots his best friend in the back, then proposes to his girlfriend.

A woman furiously beats the camera with her bag to the sound of wailing saxophones. Her wig falls off. She is bald.

An African-American pulls a white pillowcase over his head and cries, “America for Americans!”

A woman’s face cracks like a broken mirror, shattered by a gunshot.

A young soldier pumps round after round into a Nazi hiding in a concentration camp oven.

A newspaper editor pummels a man against the base of a Benjamin Franklin statue.

A sergeant shoots a prisoner of war, then yells at him, “If you die, I’ll kill you!”

With their startling subject matter and emphasis on conflict, contradiction, and kineticism, Samuel Fuller’s films are designed to hit you—hard. His stated goal was to “grab audiences by the balls!” By upending expectations, disregarding conventional norms, and combining realism with sensationalism, violence with humor, and intricate long takes with rapid-fire editing, Fuller created films that produce a direct emotional impact on the viewer. He wanted to unsettle the assumptions of audiences, to surprise them, to instruct as well as to entertain, always striving to reveal the truth of a given situation. His are daring and stimulating films, and they have inspired fascination in generations of fans.

As the recurring narrative and stylistic tendencies in Fuller’s films are so readily apparent, his work has repeatedly been the subject of auteur study. In the late 1950s in France, the young lions at *Cahiers du Cinéma* discovered in Fuller a prime example of the delightfully aggressive nose-thumbing they celebrated in Hollywood’s genre pictures and began to describe his aesthetic as primitive. When structuralism inflected auteur criticism in Britain and the United States a decade later, a collection of essays

edited by David Will and Peter Wollen for the 1969 Edinburgh Film Festival, as well as monographs by Phil Hardy in 1970 and Nicholas Garnham in 1971, refocused attention on the motifs, themes, and dichotomies in Fuller's narratives, elevating his stature as one of the preeminent cinematic critics of American society.¹

This book aims to rethink earlier portraits of Fuller by examining his films in the context of the practices and pressures of the industry in which he primarily worked: Hollywood. In doing so, I am following in the footsteps of scholars such as Paul Kerr, Justin Wyatt, Lutz Bacher, and others who have demonstrated the necessity of considering auteurship in relation to economic, industrial, and institutional determinants.² I draw on in-depth formal analysis as well as previously untapped primary sources, including script, production, payroll, legal, and regulatory files; trade and popular publications; and interviews. This book focuses on Fuller's directorial work in film, and as such necessarily neglects much of his vast written output for page and screen, as well as his television efforts. A particular emphasis is placed on understanding the narrative structure and visual style of Fuller's films, as these topics have previously received little systematic analysis.

As a writer, director, and frequently, producer, Fuller had multiple means of creative influence over his films, a situation that was highly unusual for directors of his era, particularly those operating—as he often did—in the low-budget arena. Though he labored in a wide range of production circumstances for more than forty years, Fuller's many-layered involvement in his films contributes to the distinctiveness of vision exhibited by the totality of his work. Within the history of American cinema, Fuller is the model of the idiosyncratic director, one whose films frequently push the boundaries of classicism, genre, and taste. His work contains the potential to reveal the contemporary limits of what is considered socially and aesthetically acceptable to present onscreen.

Fuller did not direct in a vacuum, however, and his filmmaking was molded by competing influences whose nature and weight varied over time. Fuller began his directorial career in the late 1940s during a transitional period in the American film industry marked by the decline of the studio system and the rise of independent production. The changes in Fuller's working conditions and degree of production control allow for an examination of how economic, industrial, and institutional forces impact a director's aesthetic tendencies. The recognition that multiple causal determinants shape the nature of Fuller's work is crucial to explaining its variation in form and relation to classical conventions and production trends. Such an approach acknowledges the director as a conscious craftsman engaged in formal decision making while con-

strained by rival concerns, providing an alternative to conceiving of authorship strictly according to the director's biography, psychology, or choice of recurring motifs.

The length of Fuller's career also enables an assessment of the opportunities and challenges facing directors in the decades following the 1948 Paramount antitrust decision, which prompted the major studios to cut payrolls and move toward financing and distributing independent productions. Rather than drawing all of their cast and crew, equipment, and other resources from a single studio, producers now assembled the means of production on a film-by-film basis, each time creating a distinct "package."³ Fuller provides a case study of the impact of the shift to the package-unit system on a director's films and career, revealing that operating as an independent producer or freelance talent—rather than as a director under contract to a studio—could both aid and frustrate creative expression and professional development. In particular, Fuller's case complicates the promise of artistic freedom associated with incorporation as an independent producer while offering a corrective to popular conceptions of studio-director relations as obstructive to individuality and innovation. While the details of Fuller's case are specific to him, the choices he faced when navigating the changing industrial landscape in Hollywood were shared by fellow directors emanating from the world of low-budget B movies. Industrial determinants can partially account for the fates of Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher, Joseph H. Lewis, Phil Karlson, Andre de Toth, and Jacques Tourneur—gifted filmmakers who, like Fuller, struggled to maintain their careers by the 1960s.

Like cultists everywhere, Fuller followers tend to seize on those elements in his films and his biography that most excite and use them to proselytize the cause. So Fuller becomes a filmmaker ahead of his time; one who makes movies that reek of headline-blaring tabloids; who transforms every picture into a war picture; who is a primitive, an outsider, a maverick. There is some truth in these characterizations, but as a newspaperman would say, they don't tell you the whole story. A close examination of Fuller's body of work reveals greater variety and complexity than is generally acknowledged. My goal in this book is to account for the total Fuller: those films and portions of his career that match his legendary persona, as well as those that do not. While Fuller's primary artistic impulses remained consistent throughout his professional life, the manner and means through which he expressed them differed over time. The following discussion of Fuller's biographical legend, his aesthetic interests, and his working methods lays the foundation for a long-overdue analysis of his rich and influential legacy.

The Fuller Biographical Legend

Over the years, publicists, critics, and Fuller himself have shaped the details of his life and his career into a biographical legend, a persona that has influenced how his films are generally understood.⁴ At the heart of the Fuller biographical legend is Fuller's own colorful personal history. Fuller began directing films only after successive stints as a journalist, soldier, and screenwriter, and his real-life adventures clearly shaped his worldview and his work. As publicists and critics wrote about Fuller's action-packed life and films, his legend took on a wistful, nostalgic quality; to many of today's writers he is an icon of lost authenticity, a reminder of an era when American moviemakers learned about storytelling on the streets rather than in film school. Fuller's biographical legend is further defined by his reputation as a "primitive" filmmaker and a maverick who worked outside of Hollywood studios, characterizations that gained popularity during the 1950s and 1960s and have been widely repeated ever since. The Fuller biographical legend foregrounds important aspects of his story but is only the beginning of our journey toward understanding his films.

Fuller's first career was as a crime reporter in New York City, where he haunted the streets for the *New York Evening Graphic*, the town's most sensational tabloid. In the midst of the Depression, he quit the paper and headed west, writing his way across the country until he landed a job covering the waterfront for the *San Diego Sun*. Fuller's journalism provided the foundation for three pulp novels he wrote during the late 1930s and enabled him to begin collaborating on film scripts and submitting story ideas to Hollywood studios. From his years as a newspaperman Fuller learned the value of a punchy lead and the importance of speaking the truth. He frequently cited this period as providing significant fodder for his screenplays, and from the late 1950s to the present, critics have highlighted the tabloid flavor of his films.⁵

In December 1941, while writing a new novel, *The Dark Page*, Fuller enlisted in the army. At age thirty, he left behind journalism and Hollywood for World War II. Fuller served with the Twenty-sixth and Sixteenth Infantry Regiments, First Infantry Division in North Africa and Europe, landing on Omaha Beach on D-day and participating in the liberation of the Falkenau concentration camp in Czechoslovakia. Fuller kept a diary during the war and incorporated many of his infantry experiences into the screenplays of his combat films, culminating in his autobiographical triumph *The Big Red One* (1980). Fuller's years as a soldier fueled his subsequent reputation as an action-oriented director who made authentic, real-life movies. Fuller suggested the impact of his war



Corporal Samuel Fuller in Sicily during World War II, flanked by a pack mule and a young boy. Mules and children pop up in almost every Fuller combat film. *Chrisam Films, Inc.*

years on his cinematic worldview during his cameo appearance in Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le fou* (1965): "Film is like a battleground: Love. Hate. Action. Violence. In a word, emotion."

The years Fuller spent in Hollywood immediately after the war taught him the importance of acquiring production control over his own stories. The screen rights to *The Dark Page* had been purchased by Howard

Hawks; Hawks later sold the rights to the newspaper murder mystery, which Phil Karlson eventually directed as *Scandal Sheet* (1952). Three different studios then hired Fuller to write original scripts, all of which exhibited the hard-boiled sensationalism characteristic of his later films and none of which were produced. Despite concerns regarding the controversial nature of his stories, Fuller remained in demand as a screenwriter, even resisting a contract offer from MGM in the hope that he might be able to direct his scripts the way he wanted. Finally, in 1948, Fuller received a phone call from Robert Lippert, a West Coast exhibitor and independent producer, who offered him the opportunity to helm his own feature.

Over the next sixteen years, Samuel Fuller made seventeen films, operating both as a contract director and as an independent producer, much like fellow action experts Robert Aldrich and Anthony Mann. He wrote and directed three low-budget films for Lippert Productions, eventually receiving producer status and significant production autonomy: *I Shot Jesse James* (1949), a psychological western; *The Baron of Arizona* (1950), based on the true story of a nineteenth-century forger; and *The Steel Helmet* (1951), the first Korean War picture released in the United States. The astounding critical and commercial success of *The Steel Helmet* catapulted Fuller to the attention of the major studios as a hot new director of action genres.

The creative energy of production head Darryl Zanuck drew Fuller to Twentieth Century-Fox, where he signed an option contract as a director and screenwriter. Fuller wrote the original script for *Fixed Bayonets* (1951), his second Korean War picture, but shared screenwriting credit on his subsequent directorial efforts at the studio: *Pickup on South Street* (1953), a gritty espionage and crime thriller; *Hell and High Water* (1954), a submarine adventure; and *House of Bamboo* (1955), a cops-and-robbers picture set in Tokyo. While on leave from Fox, Fuller produced, wrote, directed, and completely self-financed *Park Row* (1952), a sentimental yet raucous view of the newspaper business in late-nineteenth-century New York City. Though he mounted an extensive promotional campaign, the picture flopped.

In 1956, after Fuller parted ways with Fox, he established Globe Enterprises, an independent production company, and initiated a series of financing and distribution deals with RKO, Fox, and Columbia. In addition to two failed television pilots, Fuller wrote, directed, and produced six films under the Globe banner: *Run of the Arrow* (1957), *China Gate* (1957), *Forty Guns* (1957), *Verboten!* (1959), *The Crimson Kimono* (1959), and *Underworld, U.S.A.* (1961). Following the collapse of Globe, Fuller worked as a freelance director on the World War II combat picture *Merrill's Marauders* (1962); he subsequently wrote and directed

two adult exploitation films for Allied Artists, *Shock Corridor* (1963) and *The Naked Kiss* (1964), neither of which produced sizable domestic returns. In 1965, Fuller left Hollywood for Paris to write and direct a science-fiction adaptation of Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*, but the film never got off the ground. Unable to acquire financing for independent production in the United States and finding freelance directing work only on television, Fuller increasingly immersed himself in his writing.

Although he wrote countless scripts and treatments over the next twenty years, Fuller directed only six subsequent films and disowned one of them: *Shark!* (1969, from which he removed his name after losing control of the editing), *Dead Pigeon on Beethoven Street* (1972), *The Big Red One*, *White Dog* (1982), *Thieves After Dark* (1984), and *Street of No Return* (1989). Ironically, his production decline was accompanied by his critical ascension, and young directors such as Wim Wenders and the Kaurismäki brothers kept him busy throughout the 1970s and 1980s with acting jobs in their movies. Even as Fuller struggled to find financing and distribution for his films, his difficulties only further clinched his reputation as a rebel, one too challenging to be embraced by Hollywood studios. After a debilitating stroke, Fuller died in 1997 at age eighty-five.

While Fuller's biography has played a dominant role in critical assessments of his work, early characterizations of him as an artistic primitive and a Hollywood outsider have also proven a resilient part of his biographical legend. Critics in the 1950s and 1960s associated the seemingly untutored visual quality and emotional authenticity apparent in several of Fuller's films with a primitive approach to filmmaking, a notion that in one form or another dominates discussions of his work to this day. In addition, beginning in the 1960s, newspaper profiles highlighted Fuller's struggles as a low-budget independent producer and developed his reputation as a maverick. Through repetition over time, the labels of "primitive" and "indie maverick" have become the primary touchstones for critical discussions of Fuller.

Critics who draw on the concept of the primitive to describe Fuller's style typically aim to valorize his often nonclassical aesthetic. According to one definition, a "primitive" artwork that appears instinctive and immediate rather than carefully constructed according to classical rules acquires an aura of primal emotion, sincerity, and originality.⁶ It is precisely this notion of simplicity and spontaneity as more emotionally compelling than the normative style of classical cinema that many critics respond to in Fuller's work. In a 1959 *Cahiers du Cinéma* article, Luc Moullet initiated the critical association of Fuller with the term by describing him as an "intelligent primitive." Fuller's ignorance of film school conventions and reliance on his own instincts, Moullet argued, enable him to produce a vision of life more spontaneous and real than

rule-bound classical cinema.⁷ In later years, film critics following in Moullet's footsteps—such as Andrew Sarris, Manny Farber, and Jean-Pierre Coursodon—continued to use “primitive” and the concepts associated with it to describe Fuller's movies.⁸ For these critics, Fuller's stylistic unpredictability is a characteristic worth celebrating and is what links him to primitives in other art forms.

In a related argument, J. Hoberman more recently considered Fuller as a pioneer “abstract sensationist,” one of several twentieth-century American artists versed in the trashy aesthetic of the tabloids. Hoberman describes the abstract sensationist as a typically untrained artist who produces sensational work for a mass audience. In particular, he focuses on how abstract sensationists embrace the tabloid aesthetic of “shock, raw sensation and immediate impact, a prole expression of violent contrasts and blunt, ‘vulgar’ stylization.”⁹ In championing Fuller as a rough-edged producer of urban, low art, Hoberman highlights the same aesthetic traits seized on by those who have labeled the director a primitive.

However they appropriate or alter the meaning of the term, critics who evoke the primitive to describe Fuller and his work participate in a critical tradition that values an artist's rejection of classical norms. The longstanding association of the primitive with the instinctual, however, can unfairly characterize artists who produce primitive work as acting without conscious thought or training. As Paul Klee noted, “If my works sometimes produce a primitive impression, this ‘primitiveness’ is explained by my discipline, which consists of reducing everything to a few steps. It is no more than economy; that is the ultimate professional awareness, which is to say the opposite of real primitiveness.”¹⁰ In distinguishing between the *impression* that is created by the final work and the *thought* that goes into an artist's working process, Klee rightly cautions against confusing the appearance of simplicity in an artwork with a lack of intention. This caution is particularly appropriate when considering a medium such as film, which requires the coordination of masses of people, equipment, and money. Simply because an artist creates a stripped-down, anticlassical, emotionally raw work does not imply that he or she is working from instinct alone. As subsequent sections of this introduction illustrate, Fuller's impulses often challenged classical conventions and produced an appearance of spontaneity, yet his working methods and artistic strategies were quite deliberate. Casting Fuller as a primitive simply does not do justice to the complexity and contradictions evident within his work.

In addition to the “primitive” nature of his films, Fuller's reputation as an independent filmmaker who thrived in the fast-and-loose world of

B movies is central to his legendary persona. Fuller's maverick image arose in the press right as his career stalled in the mid-1960s and has been perpetuated widely ever since. The first in-depth profile of Fuller, a 1965 *New York Times Magazine* piece titled "Low Budget Movies with POW!" describes his typical film as being shot in ten days on \$200,000. Fuller himself is portrayed as a "filmic fireball," "dedicated to depicting, at rather small cost and in vivid visual terms, the abnormalities of the world around him."¹¹ This article cemented Fuller's reputation in the American press as an outsider filmmaker who voluntarily embraced the world of B movies in order to work in opposition to mainstream Hollywood. By the time British and American auteur critics discovered Fuller in the 1960s—as French critics had a decade before—the terms by which his career would be discussed were already in place: he was the primary author of his films, his movies had low budgets, and he worked independent of the grip of Hollywood's commercial talons.¹² These characteristics positioned Fuller as "a role model for maverick filmmakers," a romantic example of what personal vision and self-sacrifice could achieve.¹³ The difficulties Fuller faced in getting projects off the ground in his later years only further solidified his outsider persona.

As with the description of Fuller's work as primitive, his status as a B-movie maverick contains some elements of truth: he often shot on a low budget, and he did have primary creative control over many of his films. Nevertheless, in order to romanticize Fuller's outsider status, this portrait overlooks the varied production conditions under which he worked and downplays his frequent reliance on Hollywood studios even when he was an independent producer. Throughout his career, Fuller championed the distinctiveness of the auteur voice and struggled to direct his own scripts his own way. In this sense, he was a maverick. But he also recognized that some of the best production circumstances he enjoyed in his five-decade-long career occurred not when he was an independent but while he was working in the studio system.

The dominant aspects of Fuller's biographical legend have only brought us so far. His years as a journalist, a footsoldier, and a struggling director provide us with a lens through which to view his work, but it is hardly an exhaustive lens. Biography limits us to considering how his life impacted his movies while neglecting other forces that influenced his aesthetic, such as classical norms, industrial trends, and market conditions. The focus on Fuller's willingness to break classical realist conventions in the criticism of those who describe him as a primitive offers a useful contribution to the study of his films; however, the short articles that dominate this critical strain never explore in a systematic fashion how Fuller's aesthetic manifests itself through narrative and stylistic choices in individual pictures. Finally, when critics describe Fuller as an independent

maverick, their tendency is to portray the studios and their executives as villainous watchdogs who inhibit his creative freedom. This simplistic approach to industry relations fails to consider the variety of needs that bind directors to studios and distributors, as well as the ways these relationships can enable as much as constrain the creativity of directors.

Considering Fuller's work as a reflection of competing influences enables us to understand more fully the complexities of his films and his evolving strategies as a director. As his career progresses, classical and genre norms, production circumstances, censorship, and industrial conditions shape Fuller's films to varying degrees, resulting in a body of work that utilizes a range of techniques to express defined artistic interests. Exploring Fuller's aesthetic vision in the context of his contemporary industrial conditions highlights the most significant aspects of his biographical legend while qualifying and contextualizing longstanding assumptions about his career. A survey of the relationship between Fuller's narrative and stylistic goals and his working methods further clarifies how he attempted to translate his particular worldview onto the screen.

Fuller as Storyteller

Fuller passionately believed "the story is God,"¹⁴ and he fought to film his yarns with minimum interference his entire career. His status as a screenwriter enabled him not only to shoot his own scripts but also to rewrite the work of others, offering him a higher degree of control during preproduction than that enjoyed by many directors of his midlevel stature. Fuller's screenplays reveal a unique authorial sensibility, one that combines an interest in history and realism with a desire to entertain in an often sensational fashion. In a 1992 self-penned article, "Film Fiction: More Factual Than Facts," Fuller offers an analysis of the Mervyn LeRoy film *I Am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang* (1932) to illustrate how the fictional presentation of an event can appear more "true" than reality: "The more we are Muni [Paul Muni, the actor playing the protagonist], the more the fiction of brutality in the movie becomes factual. Why? Because we are hit with hammer-blows of emotion."¹⁵ These "hammer-blows of emotion" are what Fuller sought to create in his films, crafting his scripts to convey a hard-hitting form of truth through scenes that shock and startle the viewer. This storytelling strategy took hold in Fuller during his career in journalism, was manifested in his films through their narrative content and structure, and was shaped by his screenwriting process.

Fuller himself has confirmed—as several critics suggest—that the tabloid aesthetic and "illustrated lectures" featured in his films are



Samuel Fuller in his office while working on *Park Row*, flanked by statues of Charles Gutenberg (left) and Benjamin Franklin (right) that appear in the film. Ever the newspaperman, Fuller wears a reporter's visor. *Chrisam Films, Inc.*

rooted in his years spent in the newspaper business.¹⁶ Although Fuller began hawking newspapers on sidewalks in junior high and worked in journalism through the 1930s, his stint as a young crime reporter at the *New York Evening Graphic* arguably had the greatest impact on his brand of storytelling. A cross between the *New York Post* and the *National Enquirer*, the *Graphic* mixed an impassioned defense of the common man with tawdry stories of sex and violence. There, Fuller learned the art of “creative exaggeration” and the power of a compelling lead, two storytelling techniques that characterize his self-written films.¹⁷ As a journalist on the crime beat, Fuller witnessed and then wrote about murderers’ confessions, suicides, executions, and race riots. “Every newspaperman has such a Hellbox to draw from,” he later wrote. “Every newspaperman is a potential filmmaker. All he or she has to do is transfer real emotion to reel emotion and sprinkle with imagination.”¹⁸ Fuller’s journalistic career thus provided him not only with strong copy that he could

transform into screenplays, but also with an approach to storytelling that de-emphasized exposition and analysis in favor of blunt “truth” and bold-faced, revelatory thrills.

The desire to stretch beyond fact-based reporting led Fuller to begin writing novels and screenplays, yet he retained a tabloid approach to truth-telling throughout his career. His first books published in the 1930s—*Burn, Baby, Burn!*, the story of a pregnant woman on death row; *Test Tube Baby*, on artificial insemination; and *Make Up and Kiss*, an exposé of the cosmetics industry—reveal the topicality and dark humor that infuse the more outrageous of Fuller’s later films. When he began writing screenplays, his goal was “to use the screen as a newspaper.”¹⁹ His interest lay in “truthful revelation,” in dramatizing “anything that’s informative and always entertaining.”²⁰ Most significantly, he believed film to be an unrivaled medium in its ability to educate as well as entertain:

One day the greatest educational medium will be the film. Millions of children will watch a moment in history told through drama so gripping that dates of events will become dates of exciting moments, instead of numbers to crowd their reluctant minds. . . . There is no art medium that can accomplish this and reach as many people as the art of film.²¹

Such quotes have led some critics to suggest that Fuller’s scripts reveal a definite ideological agenda.²² To be sure, Fuller does not balk at revealing the failings of American society, and his films repeatedly engage race and gender in a frank and uncompromising manner rare for their times. Yet Fuller’s contradictory narratives defy coherent political analysis, leading him to be described in the press as everything from a liberal to a fascist to an anarchist. While he may intend to educate, the “creative exaggeration” Fuller employs in the storytelling process results in films that agitate the viewer, physically, intellectually, and emotionally, rather than offering a clear political position.

Fuller’s storytelling goal is to arouse emotion, and his screenplays combine hard-boiled characters, ironic contradictions, excessive conflict, and a selective embrace of classical and generic conventions in order to shake the viewer up. Fuller called his characters “gutter people,” outcasts who lived by their own code in a shadowy world he found more inherently dramatic than that occupied by clean-cut, well-behaved Americans.²³ In their own lingo, they are “retreads,” “doggies,” “cannons,” “grifters,” “wetnoses,” “ichibons,” and “bon bons.” Typically criminals (*I Shot Jesse James*, *The Baron of Arizona*, *Pickup on South Street*, *Underworld*, *U.S.A.*, *The Naked Kiss*, *Shark!*, *Thieves After Dark*), misfits (*The Steel Helmet*, *Fixed Bayonets*, *Hell and High Water*,

Run of the Arrow, *The Big Red One*, *Street of No Return*), or obsessives (*Park Row*, *Forty Guns*, *Shock Corridor*, *White Dog*), Fuller's protagonists lie, cheat, steal, betray, or kill in order to achieve their desires. For them, the ultimate triumph is merely survival. While Fuller draws from stock "underworld" types—thieves, prostitutes, cops, and reporters—he uses them to reveal the bitter ironies of life. He shows us an American footsoldier shooting a POW, a pickpocket laughing at patriotism, politicians in bed with criminals, children learning to become terrorists—the veneer of polite society and civilization stripped away to expose the shocking truth.

Fuller's narratives place his protagonists in extreme situations fraught with conflict and contradiction in order to produce "emotional violence." Fuller's favorite example of an emotionally violent film was David Lean's *Brief Encounter* (1945), a bittersweet romance about two people who fall in love but are married to others:

Now when you have a married man and a married woman, they're gonna cheat. They're all scared, scared, scared. But these two won't even touch hands on a bed; they've never kissed. The guilt! They're guilty, and they haven't done a damn thing—but in a way they have. And the violence is against themselves. That's better than any barroom stuff.²⁴

At first, this may seem a strange example for Fuller to embrace, given the vast tonal and stylistic differences between his pictures and the comparatively restrained *Brief Encounter*. Yet what Fuller responds to in this film is the inner conflict of the two protagonists: they want to respect their marriages, but they also want each other. Fuller equates emotional violence with the severe psychological turmoil that results from an individual having two opposing desires that cannot both be satisfactorily fulfilled. This is the sort of narrative situation that most frequently confronts his protagonists, from *I Shot Jesse James*'s John Ford, who believes he has to kill his friend in order to marry his girl, to *The Naked Kiss*'s Kathy, who desperately wants to marry the town millionaire and lead a clean life but discovers that the millionaire is a sexual predator and clean living is dirtier than she thought. Fuller's embrace of paradox often results in irony, a bitter recognition of truth's complexity.

Fuller's interest in creating intensified narrative situations in his screenplays often overrides the powerful influence of classical conventions. Classical Hollywood narratives tend to feature tightly woven chains of cause and effect; each scene leads directly into the next, with no additional scenes that are extraneous to the dominant narrative action.²⁵ These norms help to ensure consistency, coherence, and verisimil-

itude within screenplays—qualities Fuller was often willing to sacrifice in order to achieve heightened conflict. Fuller's original scripts sport looser, more episodic structures designed to contrast the rhythms and tones of scenes and to unsettle audience assumptions. Action may arise quickly—and with little apparent motivation—and be followed by another unexpected event. The narratives of some of his movies, such as *Park Row*, *Forty Guns*, *Shock Corridor*, *Dead Pigeon on Beethoven Street*, *The Big Red One*, and *Street of No Return*, even appear overstuffed, as if Fuller thought of too many great plot points and simply decided to keep them all. Sharply contrasting action, sudden shifts in tone, surprising plot developments, and multiple lines of conflict all contribute to creating intensified narrative situations in Fuller's films, even as they often undercut viewer expectations of clear causal links, consistent character psychology, and careful plot motivation. It is telling that film trade publications described the vast majority of Fuller's pre-1970s pictures as melodramas, applying a longstanding definition that associated the term with thrilling, action-packed stories.²⁶ This trend is a potent reminder that Fuller's work is a variant of a cinematic tradition that extends back to the serials of the silent era, in which coincidental, implausible, and often confusing narratives function to create heightened emotion and sensationalism.²⁷

While reference to genre conventions helps to motivate many of Fuller's narratives, his films just as often challenge our generic expectations. With a few exceptions, Fuller's movies participate in the war, crime, and western genres—standard territory for low-budget action films.²⁸ Genre films contain highly conventionalized protagonists, settings, situations, themes, and iconography; while variations on each element occur, their repetition over the course of a genre's development shapes viewer expectations regarding what is “appropriate” for the genre. Although Fuller's genre films often employ conventional character types and situations, they tend to twist some genre elements and completely ignore others, even while relying on genre to motivate unexplained action. Rather than using genre to explore a defined cultural conflict—in the western, for example, the way of the gun vs. the rule of law—Fuller selectively invokes generic elements in his films as a foundation for his own narrative interests. Fuller's preferences for brutish characters and heightened conflict lend themselves easily to some genres, such as crime and war; his westerns and social problem pictures, however, are less conventional and often contain narrative structures and plot elements not usually found within the given genre. After Fuller started his own production company in the late 1950s, his use of excessive sex and violence further warped his genre narratives, and several of his subsequent films are primarily structured around sensational set



Fuller's preproduction drawing of the character Short Round from *The Steel Helmet*. Chrisam Films, Inc.

pieces (*Shock Corridor*, *The Naked Kiss*, *White Dog*, and *Street of No Return*). Genre conventions thus provide a convenient structure on which Fuller can build his own ideas; some structures are strengthened by his fresh approach, while others buckle under the weight of his distinct worldview.

Fuller's writing process enabled him to visualize the development of

his screenplays and to orchestrate narrative elements for maximum emotional impact. His scriptwriting involved copious research and detailed planning. An early profile of Fuller written at the beginning of his tenure at Twentieth Century–Fox describes how he initially developed a story by drawing pictures of characters, locations, and key action before sitting down at a typewriter.²⁹ Later interviews suggest this process could also be contemporaneous with the actual writing of the screenplay but confirm Fuller's tendency to cast actors according to his character sketches. He also produced drawings of sets that functioned as blueprints for the art department and drafted upwards of seventy-five drawings detailing how scenes should be shot.³⁰ Fuller's penchant for visualizing his stories as he was writing them harkens back to his years in journalism, when he often picked up extra cash from drawing cartoons; more significant, however, is how this process underscores his tendency to think in pictures, to imagine how a story can be told through visually arresting images.

When working on several scripts at a time, Fuller also used a system that enabled him to keep track of the narrative structure of each project on a blackboard. The blackboard for each script contained a chart of the film's plot, with white chalk indicating exposition, yellow chalk for the introduction of a character, blue chalk for romantic scenes, and red chalk for action and violence.³¹

If I can end the first act with one or two red lines, the second act with two or three red lines, and the third act with four or five red lines, I am going uphill. So I can get a pretty good idea of the balance of the violence and of the romance or anything I want on that board.³²

While Fuller admits he did not use the blackboard to map out every script, profiles and interviews suggest he continued to strive for a high degree of preparation and careful plotting of scripts in order to develop contrasting emotion and accelerating action. As Fuller's screenwriting process favored heightening dramatic conflict and varying the tones of scenes over producing a tight, three-act, causal narrative, it is little wonder that the norms of verisimilitude, clarity, and coherence embraced by classical Hollywood filmmaking are not always apparent in his movies.

Samuel Fuller considered himself first and foremost a storyteller, and the way he told stories on film reflected how his narrative preferences were filtered through cinematic conventions and industrial pressures. While his early scripts produced by Lippert and Twentieth Century–Fox reveal closer adherence to classical and generic norms, Fuller's move into independent moviemaking in the late 1950s enabled him to film scripts

that had previously been rejected as too unconventional. In the process of establishing his identity as an independent and targeting an adult audience, Fuller's stories became increasingly sensational, topical, and sometimes less than tasteful. Throughout his career, his narratives put to work the lessons he learned from his years in journalism and demonstrate a willingness to flaunt custom and propriety in order to create challenging, startling viewing experiences. At their best, his narratives are exercises in arousal, a surprising blend of brutality, humor, and pathos. The shocking thrills contained in Fuller's scripts are amplified onscreen by his production methods. A review of his visual style provides a helpful introduction to the strategies he used to bring his punchy yarns to two-fisted life.

Movement and Conflict

During the studio era, Hollywood operated according to a mode of production that encouraged speed, efficiency, and original approaches to classical conventions. Fuller's early track record of shooting fast, spending little, and delivering genre hits made him an attractive find for Darryl Zanuck and the other studio executives who courted him in the early 1950s, but Fuller never fully embraced the "invisible" style of directors like George Cukor and Howard Hawks that dominated Hollywood in the studio era. According to the Fuller legend, the characteristics that constitute classicism—balance, order, and unity—should not even be included in a sentence bearing the name of Samuel Fuller. While Fuller's films do frequently appear unbalanced, incongruous, and disunified, they are not so all of the time. In fact, Fuller was entirely capable of adhering to classical norms, and many of his films, particularly those produced by Twentieth Century-Fox, contain scenes that are models of conventional staging and editing. Any argument concerning Fuller's visual style must acknowledge the complete range of its expression, taking into account both the traditional and the weird, what worked within the studio system and what changed without.

Although Fuller's films may often appear haphazard or unstructured, their visual style is less the result of negligence, instinct, or limited production resources than of a number of conscious strategies designed to maximize the visceral impact of the viewing experience. Fuller's work is shaped by his tendency to shoot long takes as the primary foundation of scenes; to juxtapose long-take scenes with those reliant on montage; and to develop kineticism, sharp contrasts in tone and style, rhythmic and graphic editing patterns, and stylistic "weirdness." Fuller's dominant stylistic strategies complement and support each other, distinguishing his

films from those made by directors who worked with similar resources in like genres. While not all of these characteristics are contained within every Fuller film, and they are manifested through different techniques in different films, even the most classically constructed of Fuller's pictures contain at least two of these general strategies. In conjunction with the narrative, these tactics are designed to startle the audience and produce the "hammer-blows of emotion" that Fuller so desired.

Few production and postproduction records survive for Fuller's films, yet interviews with him and his crew members, as well as the films themselves, provide some indication of how Fuller's working methods contributed to the creation of visceral effects. While his production periods were often quite short, Fuller made time for rehearsal before shooting even on his low-budget pictures, suggesting that the intense planning he put into preproduction carried over onto the set.³³ What most distinguished Fuller's approach to filmmaking were his ideas concerning how a scene should be shot. Classical Hollywood filmmaking typically strives to maintain continuity in space, time, and action in an effort to communicate the narrative clearly and efficiently. A conventional scene might begin with a wide master shot to establish the space, then cut in to a medium shot or two-shot that isolates significant action, then subsequently cut into close-ups or shot-reverse shot patterns that highlight character reactions and emotions, and finally cut back out to a medium or wide shot to re-establish the space as a new line of narrative action is initiated. This type of editing pattern, often described as analytical editing, presents the totality of the space and then breaks it into parts, firmly directing the viewer's gaze to ensure clear and efficient exposition of the narrative.³⁴ In order to provide coverage for a scene—or enough camera angles and compositions for editors to choose from—a director customarily films the complete scene once in the establishing master shot, then shoots sections of the scene again from closer angles and shot scales. While Fuller embraced the concept of a master shot, the general lack of analytical editing and coverage in most of his films, particularly those made outside of Twentieth Century-Fox, suggests that for him, the master shot functions less as an opportunity to establish the space than as the very foundation of the scene. Rather than acting as a jumping-off point for shot-reverse shot or point-of-view shot patterns, the master often becomes the dominant shot for scenes in Fuller's films, intercut with only a few quick close-ups or cutaways.

Fuller's tendency to favor the master shot was rooted less in a desire for economy than in a desire to exploit the tension produced by the technical requirements of a long take. "I don't like to shoot a scene from a close angle, medium, long shot, and then take it into the editor and see if we can do anything with it," he said. "I want to see the excitement on



Fuller laid extraordinarily long tracks during the production of *Forty Guns*—the length of Twentieth Century–Fox’s back lot—in order to film the characters of Griff, Wes, and Chico walking down Main Street in one continuous shot. Extended tracking during master-shot long takes is part of Fuller’s stylistic signature. *Chrisam Films, Inc.*

the set, while we’re shooting.”³⁵ Joseph Biroc, Fuller’s director of photography on *Run of the Arrow*, *China Gate*, *Forty Guns*, and *Verboten!* also pointed out that by forcing the actors to perform a scene in one extended take, Fuller was able to capitalize on their nervous energy, as well as on unexpected reactions or bits of business. “Sam felt—and he was right—that the longer you make the shot, the better the people can act it out, the more real it all seems, instead of making it in small pieces—cut, cut, cut, the way it is usually done.”³⁶ As the master-shot long take requires cast and crew to focus their attention and be “in” the scene for a longer period of time, it increases the potential for unexpected interactions between actors that might speak to the narrative within the scene.

When combined with his tendency to shoot only one or two takes for each shot, Fuller’s preference for the master-shot long take often resulted in a lack of coverage for scenes that troubled his editors and challenged their ability to “fix” continuity breaks. Yet these “mistakes” appear to

have concerned Fuller little, as they often contribute to his preferred stylistic strategies. Gene Fowler, Jr., Fuller's editor on *Run of the Arrow*, *China Gate*, and *Forty Guns*, explained:

Sam is a guy who shoots very long scenes, no cuts, and usually shoots just one take. So if anything turned out to be wrong with the take you were screwed. . . . If an actor would flub a line in the middle of a take it presented quite a problem for me because you had nothing to cut away to.³⁷

An advantage to shooting a scene from multiple angles and shot scales is that adequate coverage enables the editor to use a different shot of the same action if there is a problem with dialogue, acting, lighting, sound, cinematography, etc. However, if no other shot of the action exists, the editor must either leave the error in the shot or create an unconventional way to mask the error. Fowler and Fuller's other editors thus frequently resorted to cutaways to contiguous but irrelevant spaces or alternate takes of the same master shot to cover technical problems. While these solutions might effectively mask the mistake, they can glaringly violate the continuity of the diegetic world—the world of the film's story.

Fuller's editors also used close-ups and optical process shots to create visual variety in scenes recorded primarily in one long take with little or no camera movement. Static long takes could significantly slow the pace of a scene and offer fewer means of directing the viewer's attention to important narrative information. One strategy seen over and over again in Fuller's films is the use of the close-up and optically processed blow-up or zoom to vary the scale of the image and emphasize significant emotional moments. Gene Fowler, Jr., explained in an interview how he worked with Twentieth Century-Fox's optical department to produce a zoom that looked like a dolly in postproduction in order that he might have the freedom to move into a close-up and back out to a long shot during extended single takes in *China Gate*.³⁸ Optical process shots are also used in *I Shot Jesse James*, *Park Row*, *Run of the Arrow*, *The Crimson Kimono*, *Underworld*, *U.S.A.*, and *Verboten!* While optically processed close-ups and zooms draw attention to themselves due to a slight increase in the grain of the image, they enabled Fuller and his editors to stretch the expressive boundaries of the master-shot long take in the absence of character blocking and camera movement.

Fuller's preference for shooting master-shot long takes rather than complete coverage was not unique in postwar Hollywood filmmaking. The films of directors such as Vincente Minnelli and Otto Preminger typically display much greater average shot lengths than those of Fuller, as they contain more scenes shot in one long take and a generally more uniform use of the long take throughout. Fuller, on the other hand, only

produced two pictures with average shot lengths in excess of the era's norm: *Park Row* and *House of Bamboo*.³⁹ While Fuller often uses the master shot as the foundation of a scene, the editing strategies discussed above, as well as the juxtaposition of long takes with heavily edited scenes, tend to reduce the average shot length of his films. What makes Fuller's interest in shooting with little coverage and few takes notable is how it contributes to his dominant stylistic strategies. Long takes with rapid camera movement heighten the kineticism of scenes; when juxtaposed with a montage sequence, long takes can produce startling shifts in tone; and master shots intercut with close-ups, optical process shots, or extraneous footage can disorient the viewer.

In addition to staging scenes around long-take master shots, Fuller also builds more heavily edited sequences around quick takes of medium shots and close-ups. Fuller's montage-based scenes typically employ constructive editing. Instead of cutting into a detail from a wide master shot as is common in analytical editing, constructive editing eliminates establishing shots and suggests space through the juxtaposition of images. Movement and screen direction connect action from one shot to the next. The viewer then constructs the entire action mentally by uniting the parts of the action seen in separate shots. Fuller frequently draws on constructive editing to suggest spatial relations through eyeline matches—when the shot of a character's glance is juxtaposed with a shot of the object that is being seen—as in the openings of *I Shot Jesse James* and *Pickup on South Street*. He also utilizes constructive editing for more explosive purposes, repeating a series of compositions multiple times to create a percussive rhythm.

One memorable example of constructive editing in *Underworld, U.S.A.* illustrates how this technique contributes to Fuller's desired emotional effects. Gus, an assassin, has been ordered to kill the daughter of a crime witness, so he runs the girl over with his car while she is out riding her bike. The scene is organized through ellipses, as medium shots of the girl's head and shoulders on the bike, Gus's head and shoulders in the car, the girl's legs and bike wheel, and Gus's car wheel are intercut ever more rapidly to suggest her pursuit. Increasingly tighter shots of the girl's mother in the window watching her daughter's race for life occasionally interrupt the chase, until the mother screams and closes her eyes. The last shot shows the girl sprawled on the concrete with her mangled bike beside her, the victim of a moment of impact the viewer is led to imagine but never actually sees. The rhythm and pacing of the editing in the scene, as well as the need for viewers to link the shots together mentally, heighten our visceral response and multiply our horror.

One of the most distinctive aspects of Fuller's aesthetic signature is his propensity for “weirdness.” This was actually a technical term for him.



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Frame enlargements of the final shots from a murder sequence in *Underworld, U.S.A.* joined together via constructive editing. Constructive editing relies on the viewer to piece together the spatial relationships between each shot. This technique was often used by Fuller to involve the viewer in acts of extreme violence.

As he tells Jim Jarmusch in the documentary *Tigrero: A Film That Was Never Made* (1994), any time his cameraman or assistant director came across a “W” in the margin of the script, he knew to ask Fuller what to do. The “W” stood for weirdness: an aggressive disregard for classical conventions governing the presentation of space, time, and movement. Weirdness creeps into Fuller’s pictures beginning in the Globe era and escalates from there, appearing most frequently—but not exclusively—during subjective sequences. Even relatively stylistically tame sequences can be defined as weird if narrative and stylistic logic fly out the window. Explosions of weirdness are one of the defining aspects of what makes a film a Fuller.

Because the visceral effects Fuller sought could be realized in a swift and inexpensive manner—as they relied on a minimum of camera setups and necessitated only the most basic production design—his stylistic preferences were not entirely out of step with the efficiency championed

by the classical system. By adapting his interest in conflict and kineticism to the available resources and production circumstances of each film, Fuller could produce original storytelling in an expedient manner, thereby helping to make his stylistically unusual films more acceptable to the studios and major distributors. Nevertheless, his willingness to draw attention to stylistic choices in a manner not widely embraced in Hollywood made Fuller's visual style somewhat problematic, especially when exercised in less action-oriented genres that do not inherently strive to shake up the viewer. The varied expression of Fuller's stylistic preferences reflects his journey into and out of big-budget studio productions in the mid-1950s, his heightened creative control after becoming an independent producer, his progression toward increasing sensationalism, and the eclectic experimentation of his final films.

All too often critics highlight the rough, occasionally crude construction of Fuller's work and its various excesses without fully considering the range of his aesthetic choices and their intended effect on the viewer. Luc Moullet's attitude toward Fuller typifies that of many who consider him a "primitive" genius: "Perhaps no other director has ever gone so far in the art of throwing a film together. Whatever the extent of his negligence, one cannot but be fascinated by the spontaneity it brings with it."⁴⁰ Yet as we have seen, Fuller was hardly one to "throw a film together." His working process was detailed and deliberate, and he was consistently disposed toward narrative and stylistic strategies that aroused and provoked the viewer. The following chapters describe how production conditions, studio and regulatory oversight, and market trends shape the articulation of Fuller's artistic impulses, beginning with his early years at the low-budget studio Lippert Productions. While his first two pictures flirt with unconventional narrative and stylistic choices, in-depth analysis of *The Steel Helmet* reveals the blossoming of Fuller's personal aesthetic and its roots in movement and conflict.

and *Abel*, or *Pearl Harbor*—but Columbia financed and distributed no additional pictures from Globe.¹² Fuller's career as a freelance filmmaker would continue.

Adult Exploitation: Shock Corridor and The Naked Kiss

Shock Corridor, the first of Fuller's two pictures for Fromkess-Firks, is an astonishing provocation. Inspired by the story of Nellie Bly, a journalist who in 1887 posed as a patient in order to write an exposé of the Blackwell's Island mental hospital, *Shock Corridor* concerns Johnny Barrett, an ambitious reporter who angles to be admitted to a psychiatric institution in order to solve the murder of an inmate named Sloan and win the Pulitzer Prize. The first film Fuller made with Stanley Cortez, the much-lauded director of photography on *The Magnificent Ambersons* (1942) and *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), *Shock Corridor* was shot in two weeks during February 1963 on several barren interior sets for a cost of \$222,000.¹³ Fuller enjoyed complete production control, as well as final cut. *Shock Corridor* features some of the most extreme characters and situations in all of Fuller's work. His interest in the clash of opposing elements reaches its apotheosis in this film, as the narrative contrasts real identities with assumed identities, sanity with insanity, and restraint with hysteria. The setting of the film and the nature of Johnny's interviews provide Fuller with a broad platform to address America's failings, and his impulse to provoke rather than to be tasteful leads to an abundance of truly alarming sequences. The sensationalism of *Shock Corridor* thus lies not just in its exposé of contemporary social ills and near-parodic depiction of mental illness, but also in its ability to elicit visceral responses from the viewer, to literally produce shocking sensations through the presentation of narrative and stylistic conflict.

Shock Corridor opens with a portentous quote from Euripides: "Whom God wishes to destroy he first makes mad." Assisted by Swanee (William Zuckert), his editor, and Dr. Fong (Philip Ahn), a psychiatrist, reporter Johnny (Peter Breck) "trains" to appear mentally ill, but encounters resistance from his girlfriend, Cathy (Constance Towers). After Johnny withdraws his love, Cathy relents and appears before the police, claiming to be Johnny's sister and the victim of his sexual advances. Johnny succeeds in being committed, bunks with an overweight, gum-smacking opera fanatic, Pagliacci (Larry Tucker), and falls prey to a group of crazed nymphomaniacs. His goal is to interview the three patients who witnessed the murder of Sloan during their brief moments of lucidity: Stuart (James Best), a Korean War veteran who hides behind the identity of a Confederate general to block his guilt over siding with

the North Korean Communists; Trent (Hari Rhodes), an African-American who crumbled under the stress of integrating a university and now adopts the identity of a KKK member; and Boden (Gene Evans), a nuclear scientist who regressed to childhood rather than accept responsibility for his deadly creations. While Johnny collects information, he dodges a food fight, a race riot, and Cathy's growing concerns. The plot gradually suggests the erasure of the division between Johnny's actual sanity and pretend insanity until his faked symptoms are his real problems and his experience of mental illness matches that of the men he interrogates. After undergoing electroshock therapy, Johnny discovers the name of the killer. He then loses his memory and eventually his mind, freeing the name of the killer—an attendant named Wilkes—whom Johnny subsequently attacks. An epilogue reveals that Johnny regained sanity long enough to write his article, but is now back in the institution. "What a tragedy," his doctor says. "An insane mute will win the Pulitzer Prize."

Fuller draws heavily from conventions found in detective stories and social problem pictures in *Shock Corridor*, but these elements are merely window dressing. The murder mystery appears to be the means to achieve Johnny's ultimate goal—the Pulitzer Prize—and its overarching structure provides the skeleton of the plot. Yet Johnny's Clue-like search for who killed Sloan in the kitchen with the butcher knife is actually the film's MacGuffin. The bulk of the narrative concerns itself not with uncovering a murderer, but with revealing the thin line between sanity and insanity, between what is real and what is imagined. Likewise, the trappings of the psychiatric exposé primarily function as springboards for sensationalism, as generic motivation for antic, extreme behavior, unpredictable action, and gross tastelessness. Setting his story in a "loony bin" freed Fuller to cut loose from logic, causality, and coherence. And cut loose he did. The narrative of *Shock Corridor* is fraught with implausibility and excessive emotion to an even greater degree than is usual for a Fuller picture, producing a viewing experience that ranges from laughter to disbelief to horror.

Fuller's goal in *Shock Corridor* was to use the psychiatric setting to immerse the viewer in a world of conflict and contradiction where opposing forces consistently collide—often within the same person. The ambiguity surrounding role-playing and the difference between sanity and insanity are reflected in the narrative and visual construction of the film. While many of Fuller's narratives contrast scenes with differing tones, *Shock Corridor* incorporates opposing elements *within* individual scenes and characters to blur distinctions, heighten conflict, and throw the viewer off guard. This strategy is first illustrated in the scene following the opening credits, in which Dr. Fong interrogates Johnny. Johnny

appears to have sexual feelings for his sister, but when he expresses too much knowledge of fetishism, Dr. Fong cuts him off and throws open the curtains. The viewer is surprised to discover that Johnny is a reporter training to seem like a sex offender, while Dr. Fong is merely his tutor. The status of the relationship between Johnny's role-play and his core identity supplies the underlying tension of the film, as he must appear unbalanced enough to be believable and trustworthy in the hospital, but must think clearly enough to find the witnesses, ask the right questions, and learn the identity of the killer. Johnny's obsession with winning the Pulitzer Prize prompts him to remain in the hospital, even as he suffers headaches and hallucinations; yet remaining in the hospital only exposes him to further mental and emotional pressure and the threat of insanity. Johnny's paradoxical dilemma is mirrored by Cathy's inner conflict: "I want you, Johnny, but you, you want the Pulitzer Prize." Like Johnny, Cathy is also a strangely "split" character. A proper, well-dressed woman who references Shakespeare, Dickens, Twain, and Freud (though on wildly inappropriate occasions), Cathy strips for a living, a job whose risks Johnny equates with his role-play: "Those hookers didn't knock down your guard and the lunatics won't damage mine!" As part of Johnny's investigation, Cathy, too, must take on a role, as Johnny's sister rather than his sweetheart. While the distinction between the two states remains troublingly clear to Cathy, Johnny's eventual confusion over her identity provides yet another indication of his slide toward madness.

Fuller employs a number of different stylistic techniques to cue viewers to Johnny's inner thoughts and feelings, thereby allowing us to both objectively recognize and subjectively share his mental decline. Johnny's voice-over provides background information on the people he encounters, his "plan," and his experiences. The first time they appear on screen, characters are subject to a brief voice-over biography, complete with hobbies ("Witness number one: Stuart. Farm boy from the Bible Belt."). As Johnny deceives the doctors and other patients, the voice-over alerts the viewer to the real motives behind his actions and what steps he will take next ("The next question's got to be about fetishism, according to Dr. Fong's script."). When Johnny begins to fall apart, the voice-over also registers his confusion and frustration with what is happening to him ("I've got to get my voice back! Don't panic!"). The voice-over thus acts as narrational shorthand, simultaneously providing exposition and access to Johnny's conscious thoughts, enabling us to distinguish between when Johnny is pretending to be insane and when he actually is.

Johnny's superimposed dreams of Cathy early in his hospital stay similarly function to illustrate the divide between his consciousness and

unconscious. A Tinker Bell-sized Cathy in strip gear is superimposed on close-up shots of Johnny fidgeting in his sleep. Eerie music provides an aural cue that Johnny is dreaming. The diminutive Cathy tickles Johnny with her boa, speaks in a sexy voice, and taunts him with threats of infidelity: “I don’t like being alone, Johnny, but you made me be alone, Johnny. I have the right to find another Johnny.” These images of Cathy exist in striking contrast to the “real” Cathy in the rest of the film, alerting us to their existence as Johnny’s unconscious fears. Tinker Bell Cathy moves in a different manner, speaks with a different voice, and expresses different concerns than the practical, worried, but supportive real-world Cathy. Johnny talks back to her in his sleep, further revealing his desires: “I miss you, Cathy. My yen for you goes up and down like a fever chart.” Voice-overs and dream sequences are not subtle devices—they explicitly tell the viewer what characters know and how they feel—and Fuller employs them here (as well as his florid dialogue) in a highly suggestive fashion, drawing us in to the already feverish mindset of Johnny.

The dueling roles played by both Johnny and Cathy mirror the divided minds of the psychiatric patients, and Fuller taps this inner conflict to create tension and release repressed emotion. One of the characteristics of the patients is how quickly and easily they shift between restraint and hysteria, sanity and insanity. Johnny adopts this trait as a sign of his own assumed illness when he initially explodes in Dr. Menkin’s office in an effort to be committed. During Johnny’s first meal at the hospital, this behavior is also demonstrated by his fellow patients when a food fight erupts over a disagreement about medication. As no consistent factor sparks these outbursts, they initially take the viewer by surprise; their unexpected appearance in the middle of a scene leaves the viewer in suspense, warily looking for what will set off the next eruption. Dance class, a hallway, a door—inside any space lurks the potential for unleashed emotions and violence. The effect is quite like that produced by the narrative structure of *The Steel Helmet*: viewers feel that danger may be around any corner, and like the child slowly cranking the jack-in-the-box, anxiously await the next time they’ll get thwacked.

Johnny’s accidental entry into the nymphomaniac ward is a prime example of how Fuller orchestrates the build-up and explosion of emotion for maximum visceral effect. Recalling Johnny’s nightmares of Cathy looking elsewhere for love in his absence, the sequence violently illustrates the effect of thwarted desire, drawing the viewer in as witness and participant. As the segment opens, Johnny’s voice-over of discovery (“Nymphos!”), the extreme close-up of his hand struggling to turn the locked doorknob, and point-of-view editing patterns all highlight his entrapment, binding the viewer to Johnny’s growing fear. Once it be-

comes clear that Johnny cannot make it out of the room, the formal construction of the scene alters to emphasize the hunger and hysteria of the women's attack. A high-angle long shot depicts the women encircling Johnny and suddenly throwing him to the floor; the camera cranes down to watch as the women hunch over him like a pack of lions feeding on a baby deer, their heads bobbing to get another bite out of him. The angles, camera movement, and compositions formally position Johnny as a helpless victim and the viewer as one of the manic women. The frenzied emotion expressed in the attackers' physical actions is intensified by what is going on around them: One woman slowly circles the group singing "My Bonnie Lies Over the Ocean," while another scribbles furiously on the wall, chanting "I like coffee, I like tea," as Johnny begins to cry out in pain. The attack startlingly reduces the confident, smart reporter to quivering sexual bait. By constructing the scene to first visually align us with Johnny and then insert us within the hysterical violence, Fuller encourages us to respond to both the victim's fear and the attacker's exhilaration. The thrill of the sequence is decidedly unnerving, leaving the viewer, like Johnny, a bit agog. "Where did *that* come from?" we wonder.

Fuller provides us with additional clues regarding the experience of mental illness during sequences in which individual patients slip into and out of psychotic episodes. Frequently, subjective sound signals a patient's initial psychic break, as with the opera music that accompanies Pagliacci's pantomime of murder, the bugle horns and distorted strings that cue Stuart to dance a frenzied "Dixie," or the voices inside Bodon's head. This strategy suggests for the viewer what it is like to be insane—to be unable to distinguish between fantasy and reality—by subjectively presenting the patients' conflation of what is real and what is imagined. Conversely, a novel narrative and stylistic pattern involving subjective visions punctuates the arrival of clear thought for Stuart, Trent, and Johnny (after he has forgotten the name of the killer). As each character talks, a hallucination sparks his memories and prompts him to recall the past. The visions of Stuart, Trent, and Johnny are marked by a change in film stock, as the movie's 35mm black-and-white switches to color, 16mm and 35mm unsqueezed anamorphic images of Tokyo, a South American aboriginal tribe, and a waterfall, respectively. The sudden appearance of the subjective images dramatically changes the look of the film, and along with the musical score draws attention to the characters' resulting moments of lucidity. Here again Fuller exploits the clash of dueling forces—sanity and insanity, reality and fantasy, sound and image—to startle viewers and shake us into an awareness of the patients' subjective experiences.

Fuller caps the dissolution of the line between Johnny's real sanity and fake psychosis with two explosive sequences stylistically designed to literally assault the viewer's senses. First, Johnny's shock treatment functions as a visual and aural summary of the emotional traumas wrecked by his institutionalization, a barrage of his intermingled fears (insanity) and desires (Cathy). In a silent medium-close-up, Johnny is strapped down on a table with a rag in his mouth and electrodes on his head. When the switch is pulled, he heaves violently. Dialogue and images from previous scenes, including Cathy stripping, Stuart violently dancing to "Dixie," the nymphs, and the race riot instigated by Trent are superimposed on top of him. The cutting rate of the superimpositions increases rapidly, emphasized by the sound of Johnny screaming above a descending piano scale. Dialogue, image, and score unite in a fevered crescendo that overwhelms the viewer with an excess of stimuli and produces a buildup and release of tension akin to that experienced by Johnny. Both in its cataloguing of traumas and in its visceral effect, the shock treatment presages Johnny's final hallucination and his complete submersion in insanity.

Johnny's mental tipping point is the most outrageously "weird" sequence of Fuller's directorial career, a self-conscious expression of Johnny's inner torment that astounds, confounds, and exhausts the viewer. The sequence begins with a close-up of Johnny, head in hands, wracking his brain in voice-over to remember the name of the killer. A sound of thunder rumbles, and Johnny looks up. He sticks his hand out; a drop of rain hits his palm, accompanied by a "plink" sound effect. "Did you feel that? It's beginning to rain," he tells Pagliacci. Here Fuller stylistically conflates the real and imagined worlds of Johnny. It literally seems to be raining inside, yet logic tells us that it does not rain indoors, and therefore that Johnny must be imagining the rain. Johnny looks down the corridor to his left, prompting the camera to slowly pan left. The camera follows Johnny's shadow, thrown long and dark across the wall. The hard, low-key side light creates "two" of Johnny, visually illustrating the split in his psyche between light and dark, sanity and insanity. The pan comes to rest on a long shot of the corridor filled with patients. This wide-angle shot, which began on Johnny (objective) and was prompted by his look, now appears to be what he is looking at, i.e., his optical point of view (subjective). The sound of thunder and music continues on the soundtrack, increasing the tension and confusion. The sound track offers the viewer access to what Johnny is thinking, but the visual track confirms that what Johnny thinks is false. The sequence thus mixes objective and subjective stylistic cues rather than clearly delineating a switch to Johnny's subjectivity. Following another thunderclap, the

swelling score accompanies a second cut in to Johnny looking at his hand. The music, as well a shot that repeats the earlier pan but reveals the corridor to be empty, complete the transition into Johnny's subjectivity. The exact repetition of the pan visually contrasts the real and the imagined: in reality, patients line the corridor, but in Johnny's mind, he is alone. This sudden change confirms for the viewer that both sound and image are no longer in the realm of reality.

In order to achieve maximum impact, Fuller saves the most formally extreme illustration of hysteria for the moment in which Johnny fully breaches the divide and crosses into insanity. With the transition from objectivity to Johnny's subjectivity complete, the rest of the sequence abandons any pretense toward maintaining a unified presentation of time, space, and action. The camera reverses its pan down the corridor and moves to the right, across Johnny's shadow; just as his face enters frame right, the scene cuts to a series of disorienting shots united by fast, disjunctive editing, and accompanied by a crescendo of music, sound effects, and general screeching. Johnny has gone over the edge, and the viewer is subjectively swept along for the ride. Spatial and temporal continuity are no longer maintained: the close-up of Johnny looking left is followed by a long shot of the corridor, flooded with rain, and a drenched Johnny writhing at the far end; the edit suggests that Johnny is looking at himself further down the corridor. This shot is followed by a discontinuous high angle of Johnny sitting on the bench (where we first found him), barely wet. A long shot of Johnny in the corridor, pounding on doors in the rain, cuts to an extreme low angle of his jaw and screeching mouth, protruding from the top of the frame. The highly unusual angle of this shot presents an unnatural view of Johnny, shocking and disorienting the viewer. The effect is multiplied when the shot is used at the end of the sequence, with frame direction reversed. Sound effects of thunder and lightening heighten the subjectivity, while an optical lightening strike cues a series of low-angle color shots of overflowing waterfalls. As with the hallucination sequences of Stuart and Trent, the color shots express what Johnny is seeing; a parallel is created between the visions (and therefore the insanity) of Stuart, Trent, and Johnny. Yet Johnny's hallucination is even more complex than the others, as it removes all objective mediating devices and completely plunges the viewer into Johnny's subjectivity. The conflation of objectivity and subjectivity, as well as the use of disjunctive editing, unnatural camera angles, and different film stocks fly in the face of classical rules concerning continuity and clarity, thereby providing the utmost shock to the viewer's system. When the sequence is complete, the viewer is as drained as Johnny.

Rather than resolving the conflict in a false fashion—as in *Forty Guns*—or destroying the protagonist—as in *The Steel Helmet*—the nar-



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Frame enlargements from Johnny Barrett's (Peter Breck's) "weird" mental breakdown in *Shock Corridor*. Fuller fragments the presentation of space and time from shot to shot and floods the hallway with rain to subjectively depict Johnny's descent into madness.

rative of *Shock Corridor* accomplishes both: following Johnny's revelation of the killer to Dr. Cristo, exposition reveals Johnny is released, writes his story, wins his Pulitzer, and embraces his girlfriend—all off-screen—while onscreen he immediately ends up a catatonic mute. This resolution, coupled with the Euripides quote that opens and closes the film, provides *Shock Corridor* with the appearance of a morality play. The didactic interludes that function as the three witnesses' backstories also appear to bolster some critics' contentions that the film posits America as insane. Each of the three witnesses to Sloan's murder contains in his personal story an indictment of a contemporary American attitude: Stuart suggests Americans are sitting ducks for Communist propaganda if they are not taught to take pride in their country's history, Trent is a disturbing embodiment of the evils of racism, and Boden warns against Cold War paranoia and nuclear aggression. As with the more didactic passages of *Run of the Arrow* and *China Gate*, the personal confessions of the three witnesses feature minimal stylization. The characters are

photographed alone in the frame in tight shots, focusing the viewer's attention on their faces and words. In his moment of lucidity, each man offers a progressive parable, an irrational lesson à la Fuller. The film's form suggests that widespread social problems—ignorance of history, prejudice, and paranoia—are what made these men insane.

The characterization of Trent and the presentation of the race riot are perhaps the most jaw-dropping examples of how Fuller presents the viewer of *Shock Corridor* with a diseased America in a melodramatic manner designed to provoke. The viewer first glimpses Trent walking down the hallway after he lowers a sign he is carrying that reads: "Integration and Democracy Don't Mix, Go Home Nigger." The moment is startlingly contradictory on multiple levels. Rhetorically, the sign opposes two ideas, integration and democracy, that are in fact closely aligned, as both are associated with the equal treatment of individuals. The illogical opposition reveals the absurdity of the sentiment, and provokes the viewer to recognize just how *undemocratic* segregation is. When Trent lowers the sign to reveal that he is African-American, an additional shock is produced, as the person he is telling to go home is himself. Much more so than the schizophrenic identities of Stuart (Confederate general) and Boden (six-year-old child), Trent's assumed role as a white Klan leader has a powerfully discordant effect. The color of his skin clearly identifies him not only as the opposite of whom he thinks he is, but also as the victim of the very same rabid sentiments he spews.

As the ugliness continues, Trent attempts to attack another black patient, discusses with Johnny the founding of the KKK, and delivers a hate-filled speech about returning America to Americans. On the narrative level, the episodes function both to provide necessary exposition about Trent's character and as a tool to bring him and Johnny together in solitary confinement so Johnny can witness Trent's moment of lucidity. At the same time, their timely invocation of civil rights strife, Trent's role as the riot's ringleader, and their formal construction all contribute to the sequences' inflammatory effect. Both rhetorically and physically, the scenes reference the domestic battles that made daily headlines in early-1960s America: lunchroom sit-ins, the integration of schools, the resurgence of the KKK, the strong-arm tactics of the White Citizens' Council, attacks on Freedom Riders, and lynchings. With the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, that killed four African-American girls occurring just days after the release of *Shock Corridor* in 1963, the cries of "black bombs for black foreigners" and "America for Americans" reverberating through Trent's speech gain an alarming authenticity. That the man delivering the sermon and leading the riot is black increases the unsettling effect of the scene just as it highlights the absurdity of the racist rhetoric. During Trent's speech, increasingly rapid



A mockup of a lobby card for *Shock Corridor* illustrates how advertising positioned it as adult exploitation, emphasizing the film's revelatory nature and its presentation of sex, violence, and controversial material. *Courtesy of the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theatre Research*

editing, graphic conflict between shots, and extreme changes in shot scale punctuate the gospel of hate, visually and sonically expressing the growing wave of hysteria that is finally broken by Trent's exhortation, "Let's get that black boy before he marries my daughter!" that sets off the full scale riot.

Fuller's creation of such a loud, confident, proud racist was exceedingly bold, and his decision to make the character African-American simply flew in the face of propriety. In 1963, at the height of tension over civil rights, the representation of racist characters in motion pictures was still very circumspect so as not to offend white moviegoers, particularly in the South. Creating an African-American character who hates blacks is something that just was *not done*—which is precisely why the idea was so perversely appealing for Fuller. Many of Fuller's films illustrate a willingness—if not an eagerness—to ignore polite conventions of good taste in order to shock the viewer. Of these instances, the character of Trent is perhaps the most disturbing. Trent is a slap in the face—a series of slaps, a barrage—designed to rouse the viewer into an awareness of the hypocrisy of racism. Yet within the context of the murder mystery,

Cathy's stripping, the nymphomaniacs, Stuart's manic "Dixie" dance, and the assorted chases and fistfights, the viewer understands Trent and the race riot not as a mere polemic, but as an extreme provocation, an attempt to really gut punch the audience. Fuller wants to wake up viewers to truth, but he does this by appealing to us physically and emotionally through conflict and contradiction rather than through reasoned discourse. He still wants to *entertain*.

With strong exploitation value, major promotion, and organized first-run distribution, *Shock Corridor* appeared to have more going for it than many of the low-budget films Fuller released through Globe. As the film lacked stars and sported minimal production values, its primary selling point was its sensational material, highlighted in a national promotional campaign that featured publicity in major newspapers and gossip columns as well as print, radio, and television ads emphasizing the sex, violence, and "adults only" content.¹⁴ *Shock Corridor* premiered first-run in September 1963 in New York to "okay" box office at the Palace and the Trans Lux art cinema; the following week the film also bowed in Chicago at the Roosevelt, a theater that catered to fans of action, where returns were "hot."¹⁵ Opening wider in its third week, the film headlined or played at the top of a double bill in medium to small houses and drive-ins in four major cities, ranking seventh in weekly grosses. *Shock Corridor* garnered widely varying reviews, with some praise in the trades and frequent condemnation in the general press, typified by *Film Quarterly's* description of it as "one of the most preposterous and tasteless films of all time."¹⁶ Trade predictions concerning the film's potential earnings were similarly split; *Boxoffice* considered it a "strong boxoffice entry" while *Variety* found the story "so grotesque, so grueling, so shallow and so shoddily sensationalistic that [Fuller's] message is devastated. . . . [I]t is difficult to see where [it] can have any really appreciable boxoffice impact."¹⁷ *Variety's* prediction largely played out, as exhibitors reported consistently below-average takes during the majority of *Shock Corridor's* subsequent first-run dates. Despite *Shock Corridor's* top play dates and intensive exploitation campaign, it only returned \$128,000 to Allied Artists from the box-office gross, or a little above half of its production costs.¹⁸ The film's extreme didacticism and often crass presentation of mental illness clearly were not well received when it was distributed as the headlining feature in downtown theaters. Although the film would enjoy an extended release in France and eventual cult status in the United States, in 1963 there was little room in the domestic market for such an oddity.

Fuller's second film for Fromkess-Firks, *The Naked Kiss*, is also a picture that proves the adage, "One person's trash is another person's treasure." While at the time of its release the guardians of good taste at

Cosmopolitan declared it the worst film of the year, many Fuller fans name it as one of his greatest achievements. As was true of *Verboten!*, *The Naked Kiss* had few pretensions to even programmer status. Produced for less than \$200,000, it was distributed by Allied Artists as a solid B picture. *The Naked Kiss* reteamed Fuller with cinematographer Stanley Cortez, editor Jerome Thoms, and actress Constance Towers, but still provided him with little in the way of stars, budget, or production value; instead, Fuller amped up the sex and sensationalism. A woman's picture made for the adult exploitation market, the film concerns a reformed prostitute who falls in love with the leading citizen in a small town, only to discover he is a pedophile. The contrast between truth and appearance, reality and dreams is again a major theme, revealed through visual weirdness and the viewer's increasing subjective alignment with the protagonist.

The Naked Kiss traces the rise, fall, and eventual redemption of Kelly (Constance Towers), a call girl with a knack for helping children. We first see Kelly angrily beating a man before we know anything about her. The plot then takes her to Grantville, where she arrives fronting as a saleswoman for Angel Foam Champagne and adroitly picks up a police officer named Griff (Anthony Eisley). After she shares her wares with him, Griff tells her Grantville is clean—and subsequently sends her to be a “bon-bon” in a brothel over the river. Rather than take his recommendation, Kelly decides to stay in Grantville and change her life. Tough-talking yet warm-hearted, fiercely independent yet desiring marriage and children, Kelly embodies the contradictory impulses of so many of Fuller's female characters. She rooms with the town spinster, Miss Josephine (Betty Bronson), and becomes a nurse at an orthopedic hospital for disabled children. Griff, however, questions her motivations, but she insists on her sincerity. Kelly is invited to a party at the house of Grant (Michael Dante), the town's wealthy benefactor and Griff's best friend, and makes a visible impression. During a later visit, Grant and Kelly listen to “Moonlight Sonata” and discuss Goethe and Byron; he shows her home movies from Venice and says if she pretends hard enough, she'll hear the voice of a gondolier. She does, imagining herself in Venice with Grant, and the two kiss. Though the kiss initially repulses her, she brushes away her doubts and returns his affections. Grant and Kelly eventually plan to marry, and when Griff threatens to reveal her past, she tells him Grant already knows. Despite her sordid history, Kelly appears to have found bliss. Then, arriving at Grant's house one day with her wedding dress, Kelly discovers him molesting a young girl. Grant tells Kelly they are perfect for each other because “We're both abnormal,” and she promptly whacks him over the head with the phone. Grant's death turns Griff against Kelly, who is jailed for murder and

abandoned by her friends. No one believes Kelly's discovery about Grant, though it confirms what she first suspected when they initially kissed. Finally Kelly remembers the identity of the child she saw Grant molest, and the attitude of the whole town changes, turning Kelly into a hero. But she has had enough of "polite society." Through with Grantville, Kelly heads for the next bus out of town.

In this tale of small-town, middle-class hypocrisy, Fuller continues to explore themes of deception and the contradictory nature of truth, carefully manipulating the range and depth of narration to shape the viewer's perception of Kelly. Fuller introduces the "things are not what they seem" motif right upfront, beginning, as usual, by throwing us for a loop. *The Naked Kiss* opens with an unstable medium close-up of Kelly's angry face, her arm moving forward with a purse as if to assault the camera (and the viewer). The second shot, also hand-held and approximating Kelly's optical point of view, is a medium close-up of a man reeling backward from the blow. A frenzied jazz score accompanies the attack. Whoa! Arriving in the middle of a fight between two unknown people photographed in shaky and violent shots takes the viewer by surprise, focusing attention on the visceral nature of the attack rather than on the reasons behind it. The juxtaposition of action and reaction shots emphasizes graphic conflict and movement from shot to shot, while the score punctuates the explosive nature of the blows. The scene continues, alternating the two medium close-up action-reaction shots and intercutting an occasional low-angle long shot as the two struggle and stumble past a wall of women's photos. Kelly's wig comes off; the beautiful blonde is bald! The man finally falls down, and in a medium close-up high angle Kelly squirts him with seltzer and says, "I'm not rolling you, you wretch, I'm only taking what's coming to me." Cutting back to the establishing shot, she then counts out \$75, kicks him, and goes to put on her wig.

Even more so than the kendo battle in *The Crimson Kimono*, the visual style of the first scene in *The Naked Kiss* encourages a visceral response to an ambiguous event. By beginning mid-fight, denying an establishing shot or explanatory dialogue, alternating frontal point-of-view shots, and using a seemingly hand-held camera and a loud, expressive score, the narration overtly undermines any expectation the viewer may have of a conventional, clear introduction to the film's characters and situations. Instead, the viewer is visually and aurally assaulted, left with an impression of the physical sensation of the event rather than an understanding of the story. As after the wordless opening sequence of *Pickup on South Street*, the viewer is left to wonder, "What just happened here?" Additionally, as the narration highlights those features of Kelly most likely to elicit shock and disgust, it initially suppresses the potential



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A production still from *The Naked Kiss* (1) illustrates how the camera operator recorded the kinetic, handheld shots at the beginning of the film. Actress Constance Towers (Kelly) lunges at the camera, while the frame enlargements below (2, 3) reveal Samuel Fuller reaching up to pull off her wig. Fuller moves so quickly his image is captured in only a handful of frames, making his presence invisible to the average viewer and preserving the shocking illusion that the wig merely falls off Towers's head.

Top image courtesy of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences

for a sympathetic emotional response to her character. The cinematography and music accentuate the kinetic force of Kelly's blows, and the sudden loss of her wig marks her as somewhat of a freak. We are left with a first impression of Kelly as strong, furious, crazed, and rather scary, and we are curious to learn her identity and motivation.

When Kelly arrives in Grantville, Fuller slowly provides information to fill in the gaps, increasing our access to her subjectivity and presenting her as a woman with a dream. At first, the motivations for Kelly's decision to settle in Grantville and work at the orthopedic hospital are unclear, and given the impact of the opening scene, viewers may suspect, like Griff, that Kelly is a con artist fronting as a "good woman." Limited access to her subjectivity increases the ambiguity, as little insight into her thoughts and feelings is provided other than what she says and does. Even use of Kelly's optical point of view is rare. The exceptions to this pattern are telling, however, as they involve interactions concerning children, marriage, and Kelly's attempt to alter her life: Kelly feeding a bottle to a baby on the street, Miss Josephine's story of her doomed engagement to the dead Charlie, a disabled child looking to Kelly for approval after walking, and most dramatically, Kelly stating her desire to change and asking Griff to help her. Once we see Kelly working at the hospital, the range and depth of narration dramatically increases, helping the viewer to fill in narrative gaps and clarify Kelly's traits and desires.

Two parallel dream sequences are key to this process. In the first, Kelly sits with her young patients in the hospital ward and tells them a story about a white swan that pretends hard and is turned into a boy. "And an old man told me if I pretend hard enough, I can play games with the little boy." The shot then cuts to a subjective vision of Kelly and the kids running and playing in the park. (One child shouts, "I have legs! I have legs!" Again, whoa, but in a weird way.) Within the vision, not only do the children show no signs of physical disability, but Kelly is dressed as a mother, not as a nurse. The framing story of the swan's wish and the content of the vision suggest that it illustrates Kelly's dream—for the kids to be healthy and for her to be a mother. Following Kelly's dramatic declaration to Griff of her desire to leave her life as a prostitute behind and the previous clues regarding her attraction to marriage and motherhood, viewers now suspect that her actions are genuine, and largely disregard initial negative impressions of her.

Several scenes later, a parallel dream sequence takes place with Grant and Kelly, and while only slightly less saccharine than the first, it is substantially more weird. The "Moonlight Sonata" sequence utilizes continuity editing techniques and classical scene construction to unify disparate times and spaces, joining footage from unlike sources into a seamless whole and "normalizing" an explicitly artificial visual presenta-

tion. The scene is divided into four segments, each increasing in subjectivity until the kiss in the final segment forces Kelly to question what is a dream and what is real. In the first segment, Grant and Kelly sit on his sofa and pretentiously discuss Venice and Lord Byron, while “Moonlight Sonata” plays on a tape recorder in the background. The segment consists of a frontal shot of them both and two medium-close-up shots of each alone; it establishes the space, cuts into a shot–reverse shot sequence, and reestablishes the space according to classical conventions. Nothing provides an inkling of the weirdness to come—like Kelly, we think everything is normal.

The second segment begins when Grant offers to take Kelly to the place of her dreams—Venice. Much as in the shots preceding Johnny’s breakdown in *Shock Corridor*, subjective sound effects transition the scene from an objective to a subjective visual presentation. A shot of a flickering film projector is followed by Fuller’s home-movie footage of Venice taken from inside a gondola going down a river. The sound of the flickering projector replaces the “Moonlight Sonata” music and signals a shift toward increasing illusion. The segment continues, cutting between footage of Venice and medium shots of Kelly and Grant on the sofa, with Grant offering a running commentary of the footage. Although no shot actually depicts both the couple and the projected image, their eyelines and commentary lead the viewer to infer that the Venice footage is their optical point of view—i.e., what they are watching on the screen. After a return to a medium shot, Grant asks Kelly if she hears the gondolier singing. A man singing Italian opera rises on the soundtrack, the first indication of the subsequent blending of real and fantasy worlds. A cut to the reverse angle tracks slowly toward Grant as he suggests that if Kelly pretends hard enough, she can hear the gondolier’s voice. The camera then tracks in from the shot of Grant and Kelly together to isolate her in the frame. Kelly tilts her head, looks offscreen, and smiles dreamily. The music and camera movement cue the introduction of a subjective sequence, and as Kelly closes her eyes, the segment cuts to a graphic match of Kelly smiling with her eyes closed, lying on several pillows and listening to the singing. The musical overlap, direct cut, and graphic match elide the spatial discontinuity of the two shots. Set up by the point-of-view editing patterns and the music, the cut seamlessly transforms Kelly from a woman watching a gondola on a movie screen to a woman *in* a gondola—the gondola of her dreams. Fuller uses the tools of cinema to transform Kelly’s reality into an illusion.

The third segment depicts Kelly’s subjective vision of love with Grant, and its distance from anything resembling reality begs the viewer to question the truth behind the dream. The sequence uses continuity editing techniques to combine the home-movie footage taken from the

Venetian gondola with shots of a gondola in which Kelly and Grant lie, surrounded by pillows, in front of a gondolier on a darkened stage, as if the two sets of shots occupy the same time and space. As the stage gondolier begins to plant his pole, the segment cuts to home-movie footage depicting an actual gondolier continuing the same action; as Kelly opens her eyes on stage in a high-angle shot, the segment cuts back to a home-movie low-angle point-of-view shot of a bridge, as if the bridge is Kelly's optical perspective. Fuller intercuts the two types of footage to suggest that the shots of Venice are now Kelly's literal point of view—i.e., she is now in a gondola in Venice. Kelly's gondola, however, is strikingly artificial—it sits immobile, surrounded by darkness, its gondolier seen only from the waist down dipping his pole into thin air. Even the falling leaves look fake. While the continuity editing suggests an integration of the real and imagined Venice, the *mise-en-scène* self-consciously announces a discrepancy, highlighting the incoherence of the space presented onscreen. The pattern of alternation between the two types of footage continues, and with each return to the shot of Kelly and Grant in the stage gondola, the camera cranes in further, until the couple is actually kissing. Graphic matches, eyeline matches, point-of-view editing patterns, cutting on action, and alternation—all techniques of continuity editing—used in this segment to create the illusion of continuous space and time from shots that clearly are not part of the film's fictional world. The narrative emphasis on “pretending,” the reflexive foregrounding of the flickering movie projector, and the use of home-movie and theatrically staged footage all work redundantly to suggest that Kelly's ultimate happiness with the man she loves is a dream that is not rooted in any semblance of reality.

The disorientation evoked by the scene comes to an end with a graphic match between Kelly and Grant kissing in the gondola and them kissing on the sofa, returning the narrative once again to the “real” world. The Italian opera has ceased, replaced only by a silence that punctuates a shift in tone and visual presentation. But something is not quite right: the kiss cuts to Kelly's optical point of view of Grant, her hands around his neck as she pushes him away. Her disgusted rejection visually suggests what is narratively confirmed only in the last act of the film—that Grant is a sexual predator. Grant's close-up alternates with the reverse of Kelly, returning the narration to a less self-conscious style but continuing to bind the viewer to her point of view. The camera then slowly tracks in to a close-up of Kelly, who pauses, blinks, smiles, and pulls Grant back toward her, seemingly shaking off any doubts about him. Darkness envelops their faces, and the camera pans down their legs and back to the flickering film projector, a reminder of the power of illusion.

In contrast to Kelly's attack on the (then) unknown man in the first scene, the visual style in these four segments does not aim to jolt the viewer in a visceral fashion; instead, it hews largely to classical conventions, utilizing analytical editing and alternating shots. What makes the scene "weird" is *how* these conventions are used. Kelly's subjective desire to visit Venice with Grant motivates a highly self-conscious sequence that calls attention to the ability of continuity editing to suggest a unified space and time when no such unity actually exists. The net effect is to emphasize the *discontinuity* of the fictional and fantasy worlds and the false construct of Kelly's dream. The stylistic presentation of this vision stands in sharp contrast to Kelly's vision of the children running and playing; the earlier dream world is presented as visually akin to the fictional world, with only a change in characters' appearances and abilities, while Kelly's dream with Grant stands apart from the rest of the film, stylistically implicated as an illusion. The visual difference suggests a narrative distinction as well: some dreams are worth chasing (motherhood, health), while others are merely a delusion (Venice, romance with Grant).

The narrative subsequently avoids any further hint of Grant's undesirability, however, and little information is provided to prepare viewers for the revelation of his crime. As a result, viewers share Kelly's surprise and horror when she discovers the true sickness at the heart of Grantville. As with the opening, the murder of Grant stands out for its startling content and style, but now style visually aligns us with Kelly rather than depicting her as unhinged and frightening. The scene begins with Kelly happily entering Grant's darkened house and hearing an unsettling song about mommy and a bluebird, aurally recalling an earlier scene in which Kelly sang with the children at the hospital. A medium shot of Kelly in the living room searching for Grant, wedding gown in hand, cuts to an extreme close-up of her face looking front, at first smiling, then slowly turning to stone. As she glances down and to the right, there is a cut to her optical point of view: a young girl named Bunny looks up, also in a frontal extreme close-up, her face half-darkened by shadow. A long shot follows Bunny's feet left across the darkened living room as she skips out the door. As during the death of Gunther in *Underworld, U.S.A.*, the constructive editing forces the viewer to piece together the scene's overall action and the meaning behind it based on what little information is provided in each shot. Because the narration has suppressed the source of the shadow and the spatial relationship between Kelly and Bunny, the action in the segment is initially unclear. Kelly, in extreme close-up as before, glances from left to center, prompting a cut to an extreme frontal close-up of Grant, looking up to meet her eyes. A shot-reverse shot pattern between Kelly and Grant begins, as the lyrics to the song plead,

“Mommy, tell me why there are tears in your eyes.” The organization of the sequence around Kelly’s glances sharply restricts the range of narrative information to what she literally sees. The viewer mentally assembles the visual information through her point of view, suspecting as Kelly does that her fiancé has molested Bunny. The high-contrast lighting, dramatic changes in shot scale, eerie song, and unclear spatial relations all emphasize Kelly’s shock at both her discovery and Grant’s subsequent explanation of his actions. Kelly’s disgust, as well as the unsettling close-up of Bunny and the cultural taboo against child molestation, make us squirm in our seats.

In comparison to the opening scene, the visual presentation of Kelly’s assault on Grant downplays the violence of her actions in only five short shots: Kelly switches the wedding-gown box into her left hand; her right hand picks up the receiver of the phone in close-up; in medium shot, she throws her arm forward; the dress and veil fall in front of the camera low to the ground; and the veil settles over the face of a prone Grant as Kelly kneels to collect the gown at the top of the frame. Fuller provides only enough information to suggest the basic action, as viewers never learn exactly what Grant was doing with Bunny or see the details of his murder. In addition, unlike Kelly’s previous assault scenes or those in most Fuller movies, the attack only includes one blow, and the point of contact is elided. The visual style thus presents Kelly’s action as instinctive rather than highlighting the violence of the strike. Fuller is not trying to provoke thrills here so much as recognition of Kelly’s sadness.

As the scene closes, Fuller’s stylistic choices highlight Kelly’s state of shock and contrast her present situation with the promise of the recent past. The scene intercuts frontal medium shots of Kelly blankly staring ahead and folding her wedding gown with high-angle close-ups of the gown box. Sounds of Grant’s projector overlay the shots of the box, aurally recalling Kelly’s subjective visions of love from the “Moonlight Sonata” scene, now dashed. A series of six very short shots of empty spaces in Grant’s house not directly motivated by the action further punctuate the contrast between Kelly’s dreams and how they turned out. The first two shots in the series depict important motifs in Kelly and Grant’s relationship: the tape recorder and the sculpture of Beethoven’s bust; the next three duplicate the camera positions and framing of previous shots when Kelly and Grant were together; the last mirrors Kelly’s point-of-view shot of Bunny running out the front door. Rather than imparting information in and of themselves, the formal union of these disparate shots brings Grant and Kelly’s relationship full circle, illustrating both what brought them together and what tore them apart. The scene ends with an extreme long shot staged in depth of Kelly sitting with her

dress box and Grant dead at her feet. Despite the high level of ambiguity in the scene, Fuller's use of constructive editing underscores the false nature of Grant's respectability and the complete destruction of Kelly's dream. Kelly is now broken and alone, eliciting sympathy for her situation and heightening suspense regarding her final fate.

The narrative and visual style throughout *The Naked Kiss* manipulate the viewer's understanding of appearances in order to illustrate most effectively the reversal of the moral hierarchy at the heart of the film. By the end, viewers recognize that the seemingly violent prostitute introduced in the opening was an upstanding individual all along; her personal integrity remains strong, regardless of her social standing, while events unmask other more "respectable" citizens for the hypocrites they are. Fuller carefully parcels out the amount and depth of narrative information in order to shape the viewer's response, using subjectivity and stylistic weirdness in a fashion as daring as in *Shock Corridor*. Although both films feature many examples of straightforward classical scene construction like the first "Moonlight Sonata" segment, they also demonstrate a distinct willingness to throw the conventional rulebook out the window in order to engage the viewer emotionally with the film. Based on the opening scene alone, or the restrained hysteria of some of the performances, *The Naked Kiss* might at first appear raw, unbridled, and even "primitive," but analysis demonstrates just how calculated and intricate its use of visual style is. Fuller takes us on a carefully crafted journey, encouraging us to look beyond appearances and labels, to sift the difference between what is an illusion and what is real.

As with *Shock Corridor*, *The Naked Kiss*'s combination of sex and violence is its primary selling point, but it received neither the promotional backing lavished on the earlier film nor the same pattern of intensive first-run distribution. Instead, the film quietly premiered in April 1964 in Constance Towers's hometown of Whitefish, Montana, before returning in May to headline in Boston and play on the bottom half of a double bill with Allied's *The Strangler* (1964) in Chicago.¹⁹ *The Naked Kiss* continued to trickle around the country for assorted supporting dates, finally opening in New York City in late October below Allied's James Jones World War II-adaptation, *The Thin Red Line* (1964). While *Variety* correctly noted that *The Naked Kiss* "seemed destined for lower-case market in adult situations," trade notices were routinely positive, and the *New York Times* declared that the film had "style to burn," describing Fuller as "one of the liveliest, most visual-minded and cinematographically knowledgeable filmmakers now working in the low-budget Hollywood grist mill."²⁰ Despite largely enthusiastic critical response to the film, its scattered distribution in flat-fee situations limited box-office

Conclusion

Samuel Fuller was an impassioned and emphatic man. He had the short stature and stocky build of a street fighter, and as he aged his hair grew long and white like that of Beethoven, one of his favorite artists. Years of cigars and whiskey brought a raspy, gravel-like quality to his voice, and he spoke with the confidence and authority of a man who had lived in the world, talking fast, with fury, repeating words for emphasis, and pausing dramatically for punctuation. Interviewers did not ask questions to be answered so much as provide a topic for the next part of the performance. He demanded your attention. He was a physical talker and would jab the air with his Camacho cigar to underline an important point or jump from his seat and act out a scene from a film or memory. He retained the energy of a newsboy who had to hustle to make a sale and an optimism rare for one who had worked so long in the film industry. He was an idea volcano, constantly erupting. His forceful, colorful personality was “every boy’s idea of what a director should be.”¹

Fuller aimed to make gut-punch movies, the kind you don’t forget when you walk out of the theater. His pictures are rarely subtle, but they are sincere, and it is the depth of his belief that gives his films their power. Fuller’s aesthetic is distinguished by his desire to produce a direct emotional impact on the viewer, to surprise, instruct, and entertain as a means of revealing truth. His instinct was to challenge the classical, generic, and cultural norms by which Hollywood put stories on the screen, to upend audience expectations and to shock and unsettle the viewer. Despite the seeming familiarity of their genre origins, Fuller’s original screenplays are truly his own, structured to reveal that life is conflict, and truth is contradictory. His stylistic strategies seek to produce physical and emotional sensations through jarring juxtapositions and kinetic effects. He wanted his audiences to go, “Whoa!” Throughout his career, Fuller’s artistic vision engages in an ongoing dialogue with external forces—including classical norms, production conditions, studio oversight, censor regulations, and market trends—that dampen, empha-

size, or transform his inclinations. Fuller's films are thus marked by an uneven adherence to classical norms and cultural notions of good taste, ranging from the very conventional (*Hell and High Water*) to the very unconventional (*Shock Corridor*). Though the manner and means through which Fuller expressed his aesthetic interests changed over time, his artistic impulses and goals remained unwavering.

By the end of his career, some strategies adopted by Fuller had entered the mainstream, while others remained idiosyncratic. The self-conscious use of style, visceral staging of violence, and unsparing exploration of race, crime, and war that marked Fuller's films were increasingly integrated into commercial American releases from the New Hollywood period of the late 1960s on, an example of the flexibility of the classical system to absorb innovation. Fuller's deployment of irony, though, is unlike that seen in contemporary films, as it is intended not to distance us from the experience of emotion, but to push us toward it. At the same time, his overstuffed plots, abrupt tonal shifts, incongruent dialogue, and didactic interludes continue to set his work apart, linking it both with melodramatic narrative conventions and with camp. Contemporary studio executives would still likely pass on *Forty Guns* for the same reasons Darryl Zanuck did, while the volatile mix of melodramatic hysteria and social commentary in *Shock Corridor* will always raise a red flag with financiers seeking to make a safe buck. Though Fuller's work in the 1950s and early 1960s anticipated some developing narrative and stylistic trends within Hollywood, how and why he deployed his aesthetic strategies distinguished his work as unique.

Fuller's ability to produce the kinds of films he wanted to make was significantly affected by larger industrial trends. When he began directing in the late 1940s, the major studios were in the process of decreasing their annual output, especially in the low-budget range. Yet the sustained use of double features left exhibitors scrambling for films, opening a niche in the market for smaller producers like Lippert who continued to churn out B pictures. Lippert's need for talented directors and original product accounts for his willingness to grant Fuller his first directing job, as well as to offer Fuller increased production control, including profit participation, script approval, and eventually producer status. The undersupplied market for "in-betweeners" in the early 1950s thus helped Fuller to establish a reputation as a director able to produce low-budget action pictures with exploitation value, a reputation he could then parlay into a studio contract. Fuller lost significant aesthetic control when he signed with Twentieth Century-Fox, but he gained an opportunity to participate in the 1950s trend toward blockbuster filmmaking. Featuring Technicolor and CinemaScope, large casts with multiple stars, and exotic locations, Fuller's last two Fox pictures, *Hell and High Water* and *House*

of *Bamboo*, are early examples of studios' efforts to differentiate their product from television by producing big-budget action films loaded with spectacle and international intrigue. These glossy, star-studded adventure films are precisely the kind of picture Fuller's independently produced programmers would have such a difficult time competing against a few years later.

Fuller's move into independent production in the late 1950s allowed him to indulge in a more emphatic visual style and less classical narratives, but it also saddled him with greater financial risk. Fuller's status as the writer, director, and producer of his Globe pictures freed him to complete projects that broke more distinctly from classical norms, such as *Run of the Arrow* and *Forty Guns*, two scripts Twentieth Century-Fox declined to develop. As his own producer, however, Fuller was increasingly reliant on ticket sales; he needed to demonstrate box-office success in order to acquire and maintain financing and distribution for his pictures. Fuller's best chances for high grosses were either in the big-budget, star-filled blockbusters he directed at the end of his career at Fox or in lower-budget, gimmick-filled pictures targeted at the emerging youth market. Fuller initially attempted the first route, producing *Run of the Arrow* as an A picture, but tepid returns relegated him to reduced budgets for subsequent features; only *Merrill's Marauders*, a freelance directing job, and *The Big Red One* and *White Dog* at the end of his career, returned him to the world of big-budget filmmaking. Fuller's involvement in the youth market was also limited; only *Verboten!* made direct appeals to youth, equating postwar gangs of German neo-Nazi teens with American juvenile delinquents. Although Fuller's independence provided him with greater creative control, his capacity to sustain his career was hampered by his inability to compete with the budgets, production values, and star power of major-release blockbusters and his indifference toward youth-oriented genres and humor. By the later half of his career, he was one among many directors in Hollywood operating on a freelance basis, reliant on others to develop projects and offer him work. The decline in his output and his control over his films was steep.

Fuller provides a fascinating case study of the challenges facing idiosyncratic directors after the cutbacks brought on by the disintegration of the studio system. The end of Fuller's contract with Twentieth Century-Fox both freed him to pursue more personal projects and placed him at the mercy of the market to an extent he had not previously experienced. His difficulties maintaining Globe Enterprises and the reduced output of his later years are an important illustration both of the risks inherent in independent production and of the support structure directors lost with the decline of the studio system. Other filmmakers known for their distinctive, low-budget work shared Fuller's struggle to find a niche in the

new Hollywood: Jack Webb, Joseph H. Lewis, and Jacques Tourneur all ended up in television before retiring in the 1960s or early 1970s; Andre de Toth, Edgar Ulmer, and Joseph Losey returned to the more welcoming shores of Europe; while Budd Boetticher's determination to complete his dream project in Mexico effectively dried up his options in Hollywood. When comparing Fuller's career to those of his contemporaries, what is perhaps most striking is how his perseverance and commitment to his work enabled him to continue directing long after most of his peers.

Only by considering Fuller within the context of Hollywood's history and institutions can we appreciate the full range of his work and its varying relationships to formal, generic, and cultural norms. Such an approach provides us with a richer understanding of Fuller's films and career than can be offered through a model of auteurism reliant on biographical legend alone. Given the nature of Fuller's work and the frustrations of his career, it is easy to paint him as a willful outsider, a maverick bucking Hollywood conventions in favor of his own eccentric vision. Yet such a romantic picture does little justice either to Fuller or to Hollywood. Rather than describing Fuller as an outsider, it would be more accurate to call him an adaptive provocateur, a two-fisted filmmaker flexible enough to alter his techniques but ever faithful to his overall goal: revealing truth and arousing emotion.