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FULLER

Samuel Michael Fuller was born August 12, 1911 in Worcester, Mass. He became a copy-boy for the New York Journal in 1924, later becoming the personal copy-boy of the journalist Arthur Brisbane. He passed from there to the *New York Evening Graphic* and to the *San Diego Sun*, specializing in crime stories. This journalistic atmosphere which marked the first period of his professional life served as the basis for *Park Row*, his film glorifying journalism. Around 1936 Fuller worked for the cinema, writing or revising scenarios. He has published five novels, *Burn, Baby, Burn*, (1935), *Test Tube Baby*, (1936), "Make up and Kiss" (1936), *The Dark Page*, (1944), adapted in 1952 by Phil Karlson *(Scandal Sheet)*, *The Crown of India*, (1966). Two others are in preparation, *The Big Red One* and *The Lusty Days*. In 1942, Fuller became a member of the Sixteenth Regiment of the First Infantry Division, (The Big Red One). He fought in North Africa, Sicily, Normandy, Belgium, Germany and Checkoslavokia, receiving numerous medals. A passionate amateur scenario-writer, Fuller has utilized or has seen utilized several times sequences which he has been able to film on his own account: ...in *Shock Corridor*, the dreamlike sequences of color shot in Brazil ...in *The Naked Kiss* (the Venetian sequence) ...in the trailer of *The Bullfighter and the Lady* by Budd Boetticher. Fuller has also appeared for his own part in two French films: Jean-Luc Godard's *Pierrot le Fou* (he announces there his frustrated project with *Flowers of Evil*, and defines the cinema as a barbaric art), and *Brigitte et Brigitte* by Luc Moullet, (where he is interviewed by Francoise Vatel.)

PICK UP ON SOUTH STREET

Your next film, Pickup on South Street is my favorite.

You paid to see it did you? Well, then you have the right to say so. This is the story of *Pickup on South Street*. I'd been asked to write a film for Marilyn Monroe. I wrote the film for her and I was ready to begin rehersals. I had Thelma Ritter, whom I love, and I was sure of Widmark. Zanuck, who was in France, asked me to try to hold back my film because Marilyn had to learn to sing and dance for *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (A film which I like very much...in which she was marvellous). I met her often. She was very hard-working, very sincere and I thought she was adorable.. I couldn't wait, since I had another contract. I especially asked the film to be given to one of my friends whom I admire - Henry Hathaway, who loved the script and who might well have made a better job of it than me. Zanuck refused, and suggested someone else. I contacted quite a lot of the female stars - none of them was suitable for the role. Someone suggested Jean Peters. I refused. I'd only seen her in one film and I didn't like her in it. One day, when I was having lunch with Hathaway, Ray Kellogg, Shamroy and Henry King (did you know, he's an extraordinary man. He's made about 20 big pictures and he flies his own plane), Jeanne Crain came over to our table (Jeanne Crain is a marvellous girl who helped me to shop in Paris. She even bought me some ties, and I hate ties. Then she stopped in front of a jeweller's and said "Perhaps it's time for you to buy me something"). A young woman walked past and I asked who she was. Jeanne said that it was Jean Peters. It was the first time I'd really noticed her. I called her and told her I was in a desperate situation. She said "I know. What have you got against me? Every time my name is mentioned, you see red." I said, "I saw you in a film". Anyway, I fell for her, and she asked if she could read a scene. She studied it and came back. She did it very well and I liked her enthusiasm.

The film was very easy to write. This was my idea: I asked myself, what will happen to a man with a mission to get something from a girl, even if he has to sleep with her, not knowing that the girl has a mission to get something from him, even if she has to sleep with him. I was interested in their approach to one another. She has a terrible past. Inadvertently, she has become the accomplice of a communist agent, not a communist but a communist agent. A communist agent isn't necessarily a dedicated communist. He could be, but he could also despise them and do it for the money. He's just the sort of clever man who passes information. Sometimes a communist happens to eavesdrop, but that doesn't make him an agent, does it? She's wretched - so is Widmark. He has the most despicable profession of all - he's a pickpocket.

Thelma Ritter has an even more degrading job, that of an informer. He never gets angry when she spies for he understands that's her world. I thought, if I have to make this story of two people who've got to have an intimate relationship in order to get information from one another, with the character of the informer as well, I'll have three of the seediest characters possible. If these three horrible specimens refuse to negotiate with a communist agent, and don't know why, because not one of them reads, nor is any of them an intellectual, nor politically-oriented, then the emotional force will be very powerful. I thought, if I can end this story without resorting to any idea of regeneration, but make them go off together, the girl still a prostitute, going to live with a man who will continue as a pickpocket, neither having gained anything from the whole business except falling in love with each other, well there's a great story. This ending suited Zanuck. It's quite an original ending. In many European films, and I've seen a lot, there's always a little compromise at the end, a little music or some detail to show the public that something nice was likely to happen...my ending isn't like that. The last line of the film is spoken by the government man. He turns to Widmark and Peters, "You're worthless. In a week, I'll find you picking the pockets of a drunk or a corpse." With all the anger and scorn she can muster, Peters replies, "You wanna bet?" and she laughs, and Widmark laughs too, at the cop and at the government man. I like the ending. Thelma missed the Oscar by one vote that year, coming second to a great friend fo mine, Donna Reed (*From Here to Eternity*), which doesn't prevent me from preferring Thelma's performance.

I was very pleased with Widmark, who's also in *Hell and High Water*. I had refused to do this film and had suggested writing the script for Roy Baker (who had made an excellent submarine film, *Operation Disaster*, which I had just seen) to direct. However, Zanuck insisted that I do it. During the shooting of *Hell*, I learnt that, out of all the Fox films that year, Zanuck had chosen *Pickup* for the Venice Festival. I thought it was a joke. All the other companies had first-class films. Even at Fox, I had friends who made really excellent films. While I was shooting, Tyrone Power called me to say that *Pickup* had won the Bronze Lion, and that no other prize had been awarded. He also said it was the first American film to receive the top award at the Festival. This film made so much money in the U.S. that the studio was able to live off it for several months. It was the last film Fox made on the normal screen before going over to 'scope for *The Robe*.

I'll tell you what I think is wrong with Widmark. As I've already said, he's one of the best actors of today. He can play anything. In spite of what people said, I thought he was very good in Otto's film *Saint Joan*. Like Tracy, Cagney, Bogart, Gable and Robinson, he can play the brutal hero very well. When he plays the anti-hero, the film's a success. But if he plays the good character, then it isn't Widmark any more. He's too strong to be a straight-forward hero.

ON MARLOWE'S TRACKS (excerpt from an article by Luc Moulet on Fuller and *Les Cahiers*)

The camera is moving smoothly towards the left near a cornfield of beautiful yellow tones, filled with bodies, with soldiers in uniform, grim and dirty, curled up in the strangest positions, then moves up to focus on Meeker, his horse in very bad shape. Steiger stands out on a background of very dense black smoke, dirty, dressed as a farmer. He shoots Meeker and searches his victim, finds something to eat in his pockets, sits on the body to have a snack, he notices that there is also some bread, he takes some, and lights up a cigar. Meeker begins to groan, that bothers Steiger who moves a little further away. Then, in enormous red letters, the credits of the film appear on the forehead and the chin of the man eating. This sequence, worthy of an anthology of modern cinema, already reveals some filmmaker's qualities. 1. The poetic sense of camera movement. For a lot of ambitious filmmakers, the movements of the camera are determined by the dramatic composition. Never with Fuller, where they are fortunately totally gratuitous: the scene is organized in function of the emotional power of the camera movement. For example, at the end of *The Steel Helmet*, as the camera moves slowly, the enemies drop rhythmically under the furious burst of the machine guns. *Fixed Bayonets* is filled with those long 360° tracking shots, which are close ups on top of that and which, jumping from face to face, have an incredibly fascinating rhythm. 2. Humor based on ambiguity. Here, it is the contrast between Meeker's body and the coolness of Steiger, who is starving. Later on, in an astonishing close up, we see a Southern farmer singing out his hatred of the Yanks. Add to that a couple of spicy comments on the American constitution. Walking Cayote admits that the reason why he didn't try to become the chief of his tribe is because he is fed up with politics. Outraged by the idea that they want to hang him, he says: "Ah! What a time! In my time, it wasn't like that. Today, there is no morality any more. The young massacre the old, they kill, get drunk, rape." That could easily come straight from *Les Tricheurs* or some kind of American sociological film. In the mouth of an old Sioux in 1865, that's funny. With every line, Fuller tries to unsettle us; he pretends to adopt all viewpoints, and that makes his humor so great. Every love scene (the eyebrow scene in *House of Bamboo*, the tatoo scene and the slap scene in *Hell and High Water*, where we also find a terrific spoof on polyglotism? Vitapointe) builds up on a very banal topic with a text which is full of zest and originality. 3. His portrayal of life hasn't much to do with the one usually imposed on us in the movies. Much more than the civilized Brooks, it's to Vigo's *Atalante* that we have to think of. Fuller is a very crude character; everything he does is incongruous. He is a bit crazy. But we sure need crazy people, because cinema is the most realistic artistic form there is; and in the depiction of life, the sane filmmakers are still hung up on traditions established by centuries of painting and literature, forced to forget the most superficial truth by their clean realism, narrow visually and temporally. Only madmen can create something that resembles the life model, that will approximate at least a tenth of the truth of the original. But no one can top that. With Fuller, we see everything that the other filmmakers zap deliberately in their films: disorder, dirt, senselessness, unshaven faces, and an attractive ugliness of Man's face...

Fuller is a boor - but he is an intelligent boor, and this is what gives such strange resonances to his work - ; the spectacle of the physical world, the spectacle of the earth is his best source of inspiration, and if he pays attention to human beings, it's only to the extent that they are connected with the earth. This is why woman is often left out, except in *Park Row*, *Pick up on South Street*, and *Forty Guns* where she acts like the Fullerian man, and in *Hell and High Water*, *China Gate* and obviously *The Naked Kiss*, made after this interview, where Fuller portrays with an incredible talent the contrast between the angel and the beast, which clears up all misunderstanding. This is why man's body interests him particularly - a hundred times he is inspired by the naked bodies of Indians, just by the naked bodies of the sailors in *Hell and High Water* ... Tellurian filmmaker, poet of the telluric, he has a passion for the instinctive. He loves to show pain, even more sadistically than de Mille.

I mentioned Vigo a while ago, and this affinity is even more obvious in *Pick Up*, *Steel Helmet*, and especially *Fixed Bayonets*: with a carefully prepared script, and within a planned shot. Fuller creates actions without reference to a prepackaged dramaturgy. Anything can happen, and it's pretty difficult to understand what's going on. Relationships between the soldiers, moral relationships and continuity within the shot, where all these faces are turned toward a different subject, create a labyrinth of meanings. And one can say of Fuller what Rivette said of Vigo: "He suggests a constant improvisation of the universe, an endless, and quiet, and self-assured creation of the world."

From *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*, no. 93 (March 1959), p. 14-16.

Excerpts from Interviews with Samuel Fuller

"I made a Western with Barbara Stanwyck called Forty Guns . One of the scenes begins in a room. There are several men who get up and begin to go down a staircase. I'm on a big crane, and I go down with them. Then they meet another guy, and they walk along talking. Finally at the end of the scene they go into a telegraph office.One of them sends a telegram to his father. Then they leave the office and go toward the side of the raod where they hear a noise. Then I move the camera back and you see Stanwyck and four men on horseback arrive on the scene. I move back just enough so that Stanwyck and the four men on horseback pass between us and the telegraph.office. They stir up a lot of dust; and when they have passed, Im right in front of the guys I started with in the room. Not one cut! A single shot, all in movement. What I want to say is that you could spend three days filming the same thing. You could make one shot here, one there, one ϕ in the room. And the director would say: "Now let's go downstairs". But for me that's not cinema. A child could make a film like that. If you do it five times without interruption, you'll save ten days of shooting. You have to use your brains, you have to have imagination. You also need a quick crew. If they know themselves, they know everything. I made a film called Pickup on South Street that had a ten minute shot. Ten minutes! It's when Thelma Ritter comes back and the policeman asks her to help him find Richard Widmark. She has some ties and tries to sell him one. There are thirty-two camera movements. You probably saw them and thought they were cuts. No, thirty-two camera movements! And the guy who pushes the dolly never raises his head. He only looks at the sun. I am right behind him and when I touch his shoulder he goes to position number two; I touch him again and he goes to three, then to four. If I tap him twice he skips a number and goes to six. Then I return him to five. You follow me? He knows his business. And at the same time, someone is keeping track of the numbers. And the actors move around, I approach, climb, descend, skid, slow down. I repeated this scene like that all day, and I had finished around four in the afternoon. Three days gained on the shooting schedule.

Question: But aren't such long shots a little risky? What happens if something goes wrong at he last minute?

Fuller: The last two minutes certainly are risky. That's waht is exciting. The scene lasts nine or ten minutes, you near the end, your heart is pounding since the slightest error can ruin everything.

Question: But its exciting for the director, not for the public.

Fuller: It doesn't matter. Technically they don't know what I'm doing. It's exciting for me, and the actors play better that way. They grow more tired as they talk. They don't need to control their voices. If a man acts angry for five minutes, and you haven't cut by the end of the fifth minute, you will see the difference in his voice.

Question: But can't you achieve the same perfection in a ten minute shot as in a twenty or thirty second one?

Fuller:Are you trying to say that it's easier to achieve perfection in a twenty or thirty second shot? OK, if that's true then why, of allthe films made, haven't the last 200 been made your way, in an outdated fashion? Because it is outdated. And why aren't those that were made your way perfect? You shoot a scene. The director says: "You come here. You sit down. You say this and that" and he cuts. Ok, but that isn't cinema. It's too lazy. There's no imagination in it.

Question: And if one of your stars forgets a line or something?

Fuller:OK, that's tragic, but that star would never work with me again. When I shoot a scene, I don't want my actors to think mechanically of where they are supposed to go or where they are supposed to sit down. My crew is always prepared.If someone is supposed to go from that chair to that table and makes a mistake, my lighting man has

already changed the lighting so that the mistake can be made. The cameraman knows at the instant the mistake is made that it is a mistake and acts accordingly. As a result my characters act naturally. I don't like to see people walking, looking around, sitting down, speaking in such a way that one is aware of the cutting. No, first of all because it is outdated, and then because it is prudent. I never cover for myself by shooting the same scene in different ways. If I make a mistake, it's my fault. If you don't like the scene, I am responsible for it. Anyone can make a film by shooting it several times. It's a means of protection.

From Cahiers du Cinema, no. 193, September 1967.

"For instance, you have an acotr who has to sit down at a table and he wants to pour himself a glass of water. And for one week I will rehearse him pouring that glass of water. And he says a certain line. For instance he will say- I like Stockholm. And he knows that when he says that line, he must pour himself a glass of water. Now Monday without his knowing it I change that glass of water to another part of the set. I move all my props around. Now when he has the scene he says- I like Stockholm. There's realism in his face because he's really looking for the water. And he looks around and I catch a look that's new. And that's what I do right through the whole picture. And they never know, whenever they are to shoot a scene, when any business is added.
Question:Do you let your actors improvise too?
Fuller:No, I won't gamble on that beaause they might improvise and not belong to the character. Many directors do that, but I wouldn't. I can get surprise out of many people. Especially if it's a close-up. I use a gun a lot. I put a gun under the lens and they don't know it. When I shoot that gun, I get an expression out of an actor's face that's just beautiful. Actually he is looking at something that has no part in the story, but the reaction is good.

Paris, 1965 Interview by Stig Bjorkman, from Movie no. 17

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Filmography

1949 I Shot Jesse James
1950 The Baron of Arizona
The Steel Helmet
1951 Fixed Bayonets
1952 Park Row
1953 Pickup on South Street
1954 Hell and High Water
1955 House of Bamboo
1957 Forty Guns
1957 Run of the Arrow
China Gate
1959 The Crimson Kimono
1960 Verboten!
1961 Underworld U.S.A.
1962 Merrill's Marauders
1963 Shock Corridor
1965 Naked Kiss
1968 Caine