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Author(s)	Kelly Vance
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MOVIES

PARK ROW

Directed, written and produced by Samuel Fuller. With Gene Evans, Mary Welch, Bela Kovacs, Herbert Heyes, Tina Rome, George O'Hanlon, J.M. Kerrigan, Forrest Taylor, Don Orlando, Neyle Morrow, and Hal K. Dawson. At the Pacific Film Archive, Monday, July 13.

THE BIG RED ONE

Directed and written by Samuel Fuller. Produced by Gene Corman. With Lee Marvin, Mark Hamill, Robert Carradine, Bobby Diccio, Kelly Ward, Stephane Audran, and Siegfried Rauch. At the Pacific Film Archive, Tuesday, July 14.

By Kelly Vance

Film directors don't come any more "modern" than Samuel Fuller. This may seem a strange assessment for a man whose last theatrically released picture was in 1980 and whose main body of work was in the 1950s. Stranger still for a filmmaker who dotes on war stories; not the situational-ethics combat of an Arnold Schwarzenegger, but the dutiful old-school GI nexus of World War II-Korea-Cold War. He also made westerns and has specialized in action despite the fact that his genre projects became so unfashionable that deals became scarce.

His latest films, *White Dog* and *Thieves After Dark*, remain mostly unseen except by industry buffs and cable TV insomniacs. So why is Samuel Fuller lionized and cultified by film students and critics from Hollywood to Berlin? Style.

Sam Fuller has style like most people have air. He breathes it, and when he exhales onto celluloid, wonderful visions appear and admirers like Wim Wenders and Jean-Luc Godard take notes in the frames of their own films. Fuller is probably one of the most influential directors of all time primarily because of his

The Cinematic Fist of Sam Fuller



The Big Red One

"Cinema Fist" (a phrase coined by Eisenstein and appropriated by Godard to describe Fuller) visual

style, which has punched home a variety of very personal themes and motifs in a way which looks at first

like comic books but on closer inspection bears more resemblance to biblical scripture.

Above all, Fuller is masculine. The favored critical buzzwords for him and his films are "blunt," "primitive," and "rough-hewn." His titles strung together read like banner headlines, or form two stanzas of concrete poetry which definitely need a shave: *I Shot Jesse James/The Baron of Arizona/The Steel Helmet/Fixed Bayonets/Pickup on South Street/Hell and High Water/House of Bamboo/Run of the Arrow/Forty Guns.*

China Gate/Verboten/The Crimson Kimono/Underworld U.S.A./Merrill's Marauders/Shock Corridor/The Naked Kiss/Shark!/Dead Pigeon on Beethoven Street/The Big Red One.

And underneath this tough guy imagery is Fuller's story of America as a place where justice, more often than not, is served, must be served, in deep dish Old Testament fashion. Never humbly, but righteously. Sam Fuller, as known by his films, is a combination of Moses, Bill Mauldin's World War II dogfaces Willie and Joe, and Mickey Spillane, with a short dash of Theodore Dreiser. His films read just as excitingly as they look, but they mean nothing without the completely natural and remarkably unforced strain of moralism which closes out each adventure. Fuller sometimes actually spells out his lessons in boldface titles at the end of the film, lest we escape the theater thinking we've enjoyed a mere shoot-'em-up.

The hallmarks of the Fuller look (well noted by critics Manny Farber, Andrew Sarris, and the *Cahiers du Cinema* cadre, early fans who championed Fuller and stayed with

him until the film school generation latched onto a good thing) are extreme closeups, sledgehammer montage, complicated crane-and-track shots, and, when available, color which reaches out and socks the audience.

It's the style of the tabloids, which the precocious Fuller learned as a teenage crime reporter first for the *New York Evening Graphic*, then on the *San Diego Sun* when he moved west just prior to his WWII hitch in the army. If his screenplays shout like a succession of headlines and front page leads, then his images match that urgency with all the crackle of photojournalism. Naturally, Fuller aims for the top. When his scenarios are set in the city (*Pickup on South Street*, *Underworld U.S.A.*), the scuffles in the streets have the look of Weegee, the great crime photographer for the *New York Daily News* and the *Daily Mirror*. In his war films, the best shots have the power of Robert Capa. Fuller has used a long list of cinematographers including Jack Russell, Joe MacDonald, Joseph Biroc, Stanley Cortez, and Adam Greenberg, but it's he himself who puts the visual bang in his films, along with writing, directing, and often producing them.

So personal they're obsessive, the films of Sam Fuller form a portrait of America reflected through the kaleidoscope experiences of some of her most overheated people. They're in a hurry to live and fight and chase the rabbit, and Fuller is in a hurry to tell us their stories. What to any other filmmaker would be a putdown is extended to Fuller as the highest compliment: his movies look like the product of a deadline dash.

Sam Fuller will appear at the Pacific Film Archive on two nights, Monday, July 13, and Tuesday, July 14, to screen his two most personal films, the inspirational *Park Row* and the autobiographical *The Big Red One*.

If you want to understand the ethos of Samuel Fuller, you must see *Park Row*, a thoroughly idealized yet typically hard-hitting recreation of the bumptious New York newspaper scene in the 1890s, when the ghost of Horace Greeley and the living spirit of Joseph Pulitzer filled the air above "the street of newspapers." In a sort of copyboy's reverie given newsroom cynicism, *Park Row* lovingly populates an era with types: the crusading reporter who starts his own paper, the corrupt publisher (here, an attractive woman) who wants to snuff out competition, the sage old newsman with one foot in editorial heaven, the inventor of the linotype machine, the saloon-keeper, the Irish braggart, the circulation slugger.

Made on a shoestring in 1952 us-

ing three basic sets and a connecting street over, under, around, and through which weaves the camera, *Park Row* still manages to sum up the sprawling and gregarious spirit of the ascendant American empire, as seen with the eyes of entrepreneurial newshounds who create sensations for a living. Phineas Mitchell, who starts the *Globe* on a dare in a local bar and hires his staff from among the regulars, is a square-cut professional who thinks nothing of hiring a guy to make news (it's he who convinces Steve Brodie to jump off the Brooklyn Bridge), yet who fights fairly against the fat-cat *Star* and spurns jingoism to ballyhoo a fundraiser for the new Statue of Liberty's pedestal as a gesture of respect for the people of France. While doing this he also romances, combatively, the heiress publisher of *The Star*, Charity Hackett (Mary Welch).

Over the street loom, quite literally, the figures of Benjamin Franklin and Greeley, whose statues are the close focal point for a number of tilt downs onto the lone Mitchell, invoking journalistic oaths in their presence. When a *Star* goon sends one of Mitchell's friends to the hospital, Mitchell backs up ethics with

his fists in a magnificently tracked fight which starts in one door of the *Globe*, hurtles through the other into Park Row, and ends with Mitchell bashing the slugger's head against the base of the Franklin statue. Gene Evans, a Fuller regular in the role of Mitchell, is backed by a typical Fuller budget cast of actors who fit their parts so well we're surprised we have never heard of any of them: Herbert Heyes, Bela Kovacs, Tina Rome, George O'Hanlon.

The *Big Red One*, a film which took Fuller more than thirty years to bring about, his autobiographical journey through the horrors of World War II in Europe, is notable more for Fuller's much-discussed emotion and for a few scenes than for its grand design, which was diluted in an effort to tone down the director's still-vivid shock into a palatable product.

The film opens with a quote from *Run of the Arrow*: a soldier on the last day of the war attacking an enemy and later regretting it. Here the old soldier is Lee Marvin (John Wayne was once interested in the role), a sergeant who closed WWI with a mistake and is forced to slog through the worst battles of WWII

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to confront the same dilemma again. Marvin is just right for the sergeant, and Robert Carradine is okay as the Fuller character who cigars his way through the war as a combination GI-war correspondent, but the rest of the cast is only adequate. French actress Stephane Audran is particularly wasted in an asylum scene which features the clever dispatching of a squad of Germans by a dancing inmate hiding a knife in her rag doll.

Intended as a paean to his comrades by the combat veteran Fuller, *The Big Red One* is more of a collection of scenes than the unified

saga Fuller must have envisioned. Even though its budget was bigger than many of Fuller's finest films, this one somehow looks skimpier in its production values, a major factor in 1980 when the most juvenile pieces never failed to have a highly polished surface. The startling transitions and bizarre set-ups are there, but seem lost in the big picture of the European Theater of War, which for Fuller began in North Africa and went through Italy, Normandy, and Germany, ending at a concentration camp liberation in Czechoslovakia. For once, even Sam Fuller couldn't produce images big enough to convey the whole thing.

If the director happens to bring along his own personal cut of *The Big Red One*, disregard the last three paragraphs. Regardless, *Park Row* and *The Big Red One* are the touchstones of Samuel Fuller's muscular filmography, each film of which is as easy to grasp as a headline, if you wish, or as subtly delineated as a classic Japanese landscape. The safest truism about the cinema of Sam Fuller is that it's unwise to ignore. Miss out on Fuller and you've skipped not only the history of film but also its future.

Sam Fuller

Continued from page 63

He's getting ready for the last big push.

It's called "The Big Red One," the moniker dogfaces gave to the U.S. Army First Division, Sam's old outfit. "The Big Red One" is Fuller's biggest yarn; he says he's been writing it since "the second Battle of Bull Run." It spans the time from the armistice of World War I to the end of World War II. A group of soldiers from different countries stagger through the battles and the blood until they come face to face with the moment when killing becomes murder. It's something Sam lived with while he followed Patton across Europe as Corporal Fuller of the Big Red One. He's been obsessed with it ever since. The walls of his house are filled with Big Red One patches, Big Red One banners. His coffee-table top is a mosaic depicting where Big Red One landed.

The other night Sam sat me down in the shack and acted out the entire "Big Red One" for me. For over an hour, he raged around the shack holding a bayonet for effect, detailing midnight landings and ack-ack fire. As my eyes scanned the Bronze and Silver Stars on Fuller's wall, both won while he was in the Big Red One, the picture came to life. He told a great movie that night; one too vivid to stay at home.

Ten years or so ago Sam sat Peter Bogdanovich down in the same chair facing the Big Red One patches and told him the same story. That was when Sam was helping Peter "get going." Bogdanovich was then an auteurist film critic trying to break into directing. He had a script, "Targets," which was terrible. Peter discussed the plot with Sam, and Sam fixed it; in fact, he just about rewrote it. Bogdanovich offered Fuller co-screen credit, but Sam declined.

Now Bogdanovich is "resolved" to produce "The Big Red One." A good choice; if anyone knows how to play the New Hollywood game, Peter does. And Lee Marvin says he "wants badly" to play the lead. "Midway," a World War II picture in Sensurround, is turning some good numbers, so maybe someone with bucks will buy Sam's yarn. But tonight, Sam isn't thinking about it. Tonight we're watching a brand new Fuller picture, a home movie of his two-year-old daughter, Samantha, his first child. Fuller has always been a sucker for kids, it always seemed like a soft spot in his hard-nosed scenarios. Now he and Christa are parents; for Fuller, the fruits of a well-spent life. As the film runs and Sam calls attention to his elaborate panning, Claude Chabrol calls. That's nice, too. As is Sam's plan for another yarn, this one called "The Mistress." Sam says, "it isn't about a woman or anything like that. It's about your imagination. It's secretive, beautiful . . . and wild as hell." □