BOOK REVIEWS

Film Is Like a Battleground:

Sam Fuller's War Movies

by Marsha Gordon. New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. 314 pp., illus. Hardcover: $105.00 and Paperback: $29.95.

The bomb drops on page twenty-three:

> Despite every other published account to the contrary, Sam Fuller does not appear to have been born in Worcester, Massachusetts, on August 12, 1912. Fuller was a Russian Jewish immigrant, coming to the United States as an infant.

Although Marsha Gordon doesn't belabor the point, this revelation bears upon far more than simply the biographical record. More broadly, it potentially knocks off kilter the entire file on Samuel Fuller and what, for almost seven decades, he has meant for film criticism. For hasn't the vast majority of commentary devoted to this writer/director doggedly pursued, through his example, an analysis of the American Dream?

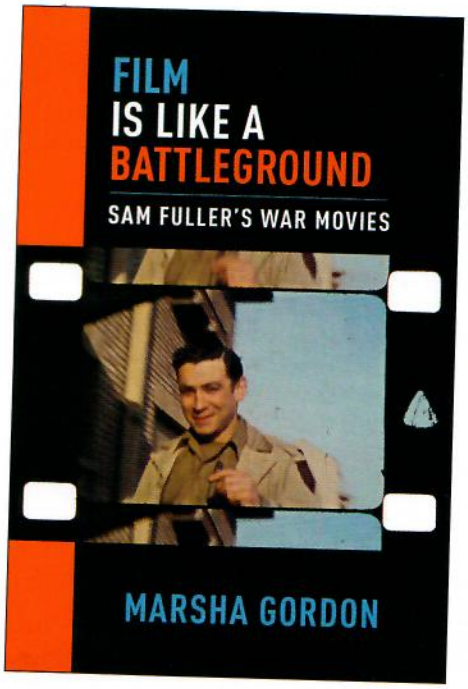
Take, as a sturdy example, the late Phil Hardy's fine 1970 book *Samuel Fuller* in the Studio Vista series from the U.K. It begins with the statement that Fuller is "so essentially an American director that a purely cinematic approach to his films would be unprofitable." It goes on to assert that Fuller's "overriding concern" is "with matters American," and that he is "an apologist for America" who believes that "all men are Americans." Furthermore, his movies express the viewpoint that "American imperialism, whether it be economic, political, or cultural, is a good thing." To top off the argument, Hardy imputes to Fuller the conviction that "one's transcendent allegiance [is] to America, good or bad."

Does Gordon's now-revealed fact of Fuller's birth information ("sometime in 1911," by the way) really change anything in that analysis? In an important sense, no—it may even sharpen the point. For we know that the yearning of the immigrant to assimilate and "belong" to a new country can intensify identification with an ideology, a way of life, a set of values, and, above all, a nationalistic "dream." Fuller's films, seen anew in this way, belong to a cinema of wishful "projection"—odes to an America that never really or entirely existed, and has today drifted much further away from its ideal.

Not that Fuller ever took a Capraesque, rosy-colored view of things American. To quote Hardy again, "Fuller's integrationist view of America is founded on contradictions and confusions that he cannot resolve," and "from the desire for America to live up to its role comes the urgency of Fuller's films." Fuller was a social critic, a keen sensor of collective tensions, problems, and evasions. The first analysis in Gordon's book is devoted to the extremely sui generis Western *Run of the Arrow* (1956), a film in which American identity is split every which way: between North and South, indigenous and settler culture, immigrant Irish and born-and-bred U.S. national.

Gordon's primary focus, however, is on Fuller's films about war—and, as she and many previous commentators have noted, the generic template of "war film" could fit virtually every one of his productions, across various media (unproduced scripts, novels, etc, as well as completed movies). Apart from offering cogent readings of films from the Korea-set *The Steel Helmet* (1950) through to the more-or-less autobiographical *The Big Red One* (1980), Gordon's great contribution here is her extraordinary archival investigation, into everything from a 1913 ship's manifest evidencing Fuller's true origin, to the FBI file on him in the early 1950s, started as a result of his twin Korean War movies (the other being *Fixed Bayonets!*).

Gordon benefits greatly from the cooperation of Fuller's widow Christa and daughter Samantha who opened the director's vast personal collection of documents to her.



(Although I'm surprised that she got the chummy "Sam" in her book's subtitle past Christa, who always insists, even in social media, on the more regal "Samuel.") But Gordon is also careful not to always take Fuller's own word on matters, or to solely trust his raconteur-honed recollection of events. As in Lisa Dombrowski's excellent 2009 book *The Films of Samuel Fuller: If You Die, I'll Kill You!*, emphasis is placed on the ongoing detail of Fuller's skills (and difficulties) as an independent producer, negotiating between censors, military authorities, studio heads, and interfering producers. One can admire, all over again and in a now broader industrial perspective, Fuller's perspicacity in making one of the very first films about the Vietnam War in *China Gate* (1957), and his tenacity in trying to realize projects such as *The Rifle*, also set in Vietnam, which finally appeared as a novel in 1982.

Many of Gordon's discoveries are welcome, such as her detailing of Fuller's little-known 1944 short story "Johnny Had a Little Lamb"—in which the American soldier hero, herding sheep in Sicily, must send forth his beloved flock to test for mines, and subsequently watches them being blown up and landing on the ground as "burning meat." It is the very model of the type of war scene, both matter-of-fact and strangely poetic, that (as Gordon notes) would fill Fuller's cinema. Gordon's attention and sensitivity to such detail made me wonder why, much later in the book, she chooses to exclude the 2004 reconstruction of *The Big Red One* (preferring to focus on the 1980 version) in her discussion of that central work in Fuller's life and oeuvre—since, despite some debatable editorial decisions taken by the late Richard Schickel, the longer cut certainly reinstates far grittier details of Fuller's initial vision, such as his provocative emphasis on the role of sexuality in war.

As with any study devoted to a director, the point from where the argument sets off determines much of the ground that is subsequently covered. For Gordon, that point of origin is her own experience as a student encountering Fuller's films for the first time—"taken in at once, fascinated by the bluntness of Fuller's style and the stylishness of Fuller's bluntness"—which leads on to her later experience as a teacher ("many students laugh awkwardly during a scene in a Fuller film"). These encounters feed her sense that, still today, "Fuller's films have not been given the sustained attention that has been lavishly applied to many of his contemporaries," such as John Ford or

Nicholas Ray. (Although Fuller, let's note, is still way ahead of Josef von Sternberg or even Ernst Lubitsch on that score.)

I don't dispute the authenticity or honesty of Gordon's sense of Fuller's current reputation in the cinematic pantheon; but I happen to begin from a different point of origin, and so I don't quite share her intuition on this. As an Australian teenager in the 1970s, a love for Fuller was virtually synonymous with what I would later learn to call "cinephilia." On television, I was able to easily see, within a short period of time, around a dozen of his films, from the best (*Underworld U.S.A.*, 1960) down to the worst (*Hell and High Water*, 1954). There was even, in the local underground of experimental filmmakers, already a short film declaring itself *Beyond Fuller* (1972) in its interrogation of the alluring, cinematic spectacle—a critique that was also a gesture of profound respect, performed by the critic/scholar Barrett Hodsdon, author of a notable 2017 study, *The Elusive Auteur* (McFarland).

As a young, voracious reader, I was immersed in analytical writing on Fuller; as Gordon notes, this was the era of a wave of research (mostly in the U.K.) that preceded and followed the retrospective devoted to the director at the Edinburgh Film Festival in 1969. Indeed, Fuller had a way of inciting champions in almost every school or tendency of film criticism, from humanist to structuralist, and also a nascent "cultural studies" approach. The sociopolitical considerations of Fuller in the books of that time by Hardy and Nicholas Garnham, and articles by Raymond Durgnat, Peter Wollen, and Victor Perkins, were often astute and nuanced. But, down on the street (as it were) of worldwide cinephilia, the more frankly boyish enthusiasm for Fuller voiced by a previous, French generation (like Jean-Luc Godard and Luc Moullet at *Cahiers du cinéma*) held greater sway.

Let's not mince words here: in those balmy days of cinephilia, Fuller was celebrated as the lyric poet of sensational violence—and this violence was taken as the model not only for great cinema but also dynamic thought and dramatic action. Hardy in 1970 put it as level-headedly as he could: "Just as violence is at the core of Fuller's world, so his style centres on the violent yoking-together of disparate elements." In his 2012 look-back on his essays on Fuller from that time, Thomas Elsaesser expresses a similar conviction: "I became quite obsessed with what I thought was one of the cinema's natural dialecticians, someone who not only could keep two contradictory thoughts simultaneously in his head, but actually put them in mine, by the sheer improbability of what he put on the screen."

If that particular way of celebrating Fuller is still familiar today, that's because it is, in a watered-down form, the Quentin Tarantino (and company) line on filmic spectacle in a nutshell. *Inglourious Basterds*, for example, is a Fuller homage right down that line. So it's fascinating now to look back on these past critical writings with Gordon's book on hand as a necessary corrective. In the older appreciations, what really mattered were Fuller's background in tabloid journalism (hence his punchy, nervous style) and his war record as a soldier. Both these elements of his biography were often equally glamorized and romanticized. It is only much later—partly because of the insistence on it in the director's superb autobiography, *A Third Face: My Tale of Writing, Fighting, and Filmmaking* (2002)—that critics such as Bill Krohn came to emphasize a darker aspect of the war experience: the lifelong trauma (formerly popularly known as "combat shock") it induced in Fuller, as in so many who have served in wars everywhere.

Even more astonishingly, it is remarkable to realize how many pages of Fuller adulation from days of yore can go by without a single mention of the Holocaust, and of Fuller's direct (and, again, scarring) experience of helping to liberate and document the camp at Falkenau in May 1945. It is this event that Gordon puts at the heart of her project, closely reviewing both the original footage that Fuller shot there and assembled at the end of the war, and the subsequent testimony that he gave in the presence of this imagery, forty-three years later, in Emil Weiss's *Falkenau, the Impossible* (1988).

A few others, such as the French philosopher and art historian Georges Didi-Huberman, have discussed this crucial aspect of Fuller's life and work; but none have given it the full, enlightening context that Gordon provides in *Film Is Like a Battleground*. It takes its place among the indispensable film books of recent years.—**Adrian Martin**

Notes on the Cinematograph

by Robert Bresson; translated by Jonathan Griffin. New York: New York Review Books, 2016. 112 pp. Paperback: $14.00.

Bresson on Bresson:

Interviews 1943–1983

by Robert Bresson; edited by Mylene Bresson, translated by Anna Moschovakis. New York: New York Review Books, 2016, 304 pp. Hardcover: $24.95.

Three-quarters of a century after *Les Anges du péché* (1943), Bresson's first feature, and thirty-four years after *L'Argent* (1983), his last, many cinephiles are still resistant to what they call the bleakness of his films and are still perplexed by the aesthetic he pursued. Their complaints take many forms, but usually come down to the filmmaker's dispensing with that beloved commodity of all mainstream cinema, as well as most so-called "art" cinema—namely, actors, or, to be more precise, acting. Throughout the interviews collected in *Bresson on Bresson*, the complaint comes up time and again. Even a question that begins with praise soon edges hesitantly toward a "but," to what François-Régis Bastide—a moderator reacting to an audience member "enormously disconcerted" by the way Martin LaSalle speaks in *Pickpocket* (1959)—called "the burning question." No other aspect of Bresson's work elicits as much groaning and head shaking. Ambivalence over the religious nature of many of his subjects, the somberness of his narratives, and the tragic nature of their denouements seem displacements of the real issue: that viewers feel left out, willfully deprived of a pleasure they presume every narrative film is obliged to provide—namely, the convention that allows them to "identify with" and thus understand the plight of a protagonist. In the absence of this "given" of narrative cinema, they declare, any failure to sympathize with a character is the fault of the filmmaker's eccentric, if not inhuman tendencies.

Anyone who has lectured on and taught Bresson encounters this resistance. "Yeah, okay, I get the story and all that, but why couldn't he have done it with *real* actors?" Given the numerous occasions on which Bresson was confronted with angry responses to his approach to actors in interview after interview—many included in the volume under review—he would be the last person to find surprising the persistence of the question and the sense of deprivation it implies. It would merely confirm what he knew: most filmmakers and viewers remain under the spell of theater, of needing that thrill of the dramatic that commercial entertainment readily offers and that arty filmmakers find difficult to resist. From this perspective, there is little difference between the latest *Star Wars* and any art film acclaimed at film festivals. Special effects and 3-D merely enhance the conventions of melodrama, which also enslave films of social or political relevance that strain to move us via the well-trodden path of simulating emotions and appeals to sentiment. Lectures, as the Greeks knew, are rife with irresistible rhetorical power.

Those resistant to such views and to Bresson will not be persuaded by anything in the two books under review, if, indeed, they are inclined to read them at all. Both the collection of interviews and Bresson's *Notes* will appeal, however, not only to the already converted, but also to viewers just discovering Bresson and perhaps sated with what is dished out by mainstream media.

In both books, Bresson reiterates his efforts to purge film of every sign of cheap sentiment and his determination to eliminate the cinema's stubborn ties to the