
Samuel Fuller: Pacifist or Warmonger?

SANDRA ORTIZ-VALENCIA

UNIVERSITY OF WYOMING

In 1944, while John Ford and his unit of cinematographers landed in Normandy ready to cover Operation Overlord, the First Division of the 26th Infantry Regiment, known as The Big Red One, also landed (Roch 252). One of its soldiers was Samuel Fuller, whose output of warfare movies is a constant in his career. He produced six films from 1951 until 1962: *The Steel Helmet* (1951), *Fixed Bayonets* (1951), *Hell and High Water* (1954), *China Gate* (1957), *Verboten!* (1959), and *Merrill's Marauders* (1962). Afterwards, Fuller had to wait nearly twenty years to conclude his lifelong film project, *The Big Red One* (1980)—its director's cut was not released until 2004, seven years after his death.¹ Fuller's experiences in World War II defined his portrayal of war throughout his entire career. Warfare became an important, if not the most important, leitmotif of his long-lived conceptual and aesthetic vision, although his films do not completely abide by Hollywood's canon of the period. Fuller sought a realistic depiction of the battlefield by focusing on the foot soldier. This aspect of his war films aroused controversy with the MPAA, studio executives, and critics because it triggered ethical reflection among viewers.

Fuller's experiences as a soldier, together with the events that surrounded the production of his war films, reflect his views on politics and military intervention. This essay deals with some of these films, which provide evidence to understand Fuller's perspectives and aesthetic aims in portraying warfare. The motion pictures included are *The Steel Helmet*, in which Sergeant Zack meets a young Korean kid, nicknamed Short Round, who joins him in a platoon that must protect a Buddhist temple used as a check point; *Merrill's Marauders*, set in Burma about operations and battles fought and led by General Frank Dow Merrill; and *The Big Red One*, named for his World War II platoon and its experiences. Overall, Fuller's war films always went against the general trend of the time. *The Steel Helmet* presented a dirty portrait of the Korean War when Hollywood was pushing filmmakers to justify American intervention in Asia; *Merrill's Marauders* avoids providing any political explanation for fighting a war at the peak of the Vietnam War; and finally, in the late 1970s, when studios and filmmakers were questioning American intervention in Vietnam (Michael Cimino's 1978 *The Deer Hunter* and Francis Ford Coppola's 1979 *Apocalypse Now*) Fuller released *The Big Red One*: "a rough, restrained portrait of another war, one that was just as terrible,

that had to be won. In this war, what took precedence was not military but human logic, i.e. survival” (Roch 177).² Aiming to present a plausible depiction of war, Fuller’s films primarily focus on the individual participants, portraying the “real war” that he himself experienced, that is, that of the foot soldier. He was neither a pacifist nor a warmonger, but a bit of both. He overcame and transformed a traumatic personal experience into cultural artifacts that challenged given preconceptions about warfare, bringing to the forefront the contradictions and paradoxes of a society that rejects, but also needs, military conflict.

Hollywood: Making Movies, Shaping Minds

Catalan anthropologist Manuel Delgado notes that “what explains the value and validity of war films relies on their ability to pose profound ethical questions. . . . This genre exposes reflections about the human condition, and about the human condition under extreme situations” (13). He adds that war films are “essentially moral, in the sense that [they] usually contain essential considerations about good and bad, even just to advise us about the resulting fluctuating boundaries in exceptional situations such as the state of war represents” (Delgado 13). These ethical questions are the basis of the genre and expose its relevance and the necessity to analyze the discourses conveyed in war films. Although the movie medium has changed according to social, cultural, and political situations throughout history, the influence that cinema has on societies is undeniable. Before specifically tackling Fuller’s films, it is imperative to frame the conventions about the genre, so that one can later determine to what extent he followed them.

To influence or shape public opinion, the American film industry, as a mass-media cultural producer, created a set of narrative conventions for films—especially in the combat genre—that were apparently aligned with the political interests of the American government. The ideological constant among these practices is American exceptionalist ideology: the imposition, even by force, of American ideas of democracy and freedom constitutes an intrinsic duty of the United States. According to Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, American media corporations became a platform to “organize and bring meaning to everyday lives,” providing the necessary ideological and cultural support for the power structures in America (2). The “Hollywood war machine,” as these scholars called it, incorporates and legitimizes political imperialistic culture into popular language by making military interventions appear “natural, routine, and desirable, if not noble” (Boggs and Pollard 11). In the same light, Edmond Roch points out that cinema goes beyond the representation of war, “becom[ing] its own image” (19). Roch, like Boggs and Pollard, understands cinema as an ideological platform that “present[s] an official, organized, and comprehensible version of the conflict . . . [and

that] explain[s], clarif[ies], and forg[es] the myths we identify with history” (20). Therefore, by romanticizing warfare, the genre has been historically used to justify and legitimize military interventions. The potential of war films as a political or ideological tool is irrefutable. What matters, however, is to what degree that tool is used. In other words, whether it is used positively or negatively largely depends on the filmmaker’s views and purpose.

One wonders whether Fuller was a loyal supporter of, or an irreverent reactionary against, the prevalent ideology. Chronologically, he should have embraced it, since his filmography spans the same period as the Hollywood war machine. However, with him, nothing is ever black or white, but rather a shade of gray. His ambivalence and idiosyncratic views are difficult to catalogue. He created a very personal discourse in his war movies that countered the prevailing standards of the film industry, while retaining certain features of the Hollywood war perspective.

Uncivilized Wars: Fuller’s Vision of Warfare

Fuller’s war perspective was as blunt as he was. As Marsha Gordon puts it, his fixation with “war and strife had roots that stretch back to the 1930s and to his years as a journalist writer . . . even before becoming a soldier, Fuller was fascinated by the militaristic aspects of modern life” (Gordon 5). That is why in 1947, while working as a journalist, he joined the U.S. Army to fight in World War II because he “was inspired by Roosevelt’s call to arms against the aggressors . . . [and] had a helluva opportunity to cover the biggest crime story of the century” (*A Third Face* 105).³ In fact, as Gordon’s research on undisclosed materials of the filmmaker demonstrates, his diaries were “all potential story material” (Gordon 8).

As an infantry soldier of *The Big Red One*, Fuller participated in operations in Africa, Sicily, Normandy, Belgium, and Czechoslovakia for four years. He even shot his first amateur film when his regiment took the concentration camp of Falkenau. Recalling a dreadful war experience, he comments on the difficult role of soldiers and the definition of war: “[soldiers] lose their judgment and sometimes they even go berserk. War itself is organized insanity. . . . Civilized wars just don’t exist” (120). On the same note, Fuller states, “Survival was the one thought that held dominion over everything else in a doggie’s universe” (122). He also emphasizes the chaotic and fortuitous nature of war. For him, “wars are full of accidents,” in which being hit by “friendly fire” was a common occurrence (*A Third Face* 129). In fact, what annoyed Fuller most was the sharp difference between his own experience and the heroic figures “anointed by brain-trust boys, generals, or newspaper editors behind desks far from the death and destruction” (166). Without a doubt, Fuller’s experience in World War II inspired and defined

his career as a filmmaker; his perspectives about this conflict constituted his movies' leitmotifs. Hence, because of his own personal experience, he never understood war as an epic or heroic event, but rather considered armed conflicts as harrowing situations where soldiers pay the highest toll.

World War II transformed Fuller's views, especially about this nation and the ideals for which he fought. These perceptions regularly reappear in his movies and influence his aesthetics. His primary aim was to present the battlefield as mayhem, a place where there are no heroes, only human beings carrying out a most hazardous action. His films are aimed at portraying the madness of war. Perhaps two scenes—the first in *The Steel Helmet*; the second in *Merrill's Marauders*—best summarize the filmmaker's position. The first scene illustrates how soldiers constantly face the possibility of death and its unexpectedness: while retrieving the identification tag of a dead man, a soldier of the platoon is killed by a mine. This theme is then reprised in *Merrill's Marauders* in a sequence that best embodies this idea with the fight at the Shaduzup railhead. The battle takes place among concrete blocks that create a confusing series of alleys and blind spots. American and Japanese soldiers are hidden throughout this hulking concrete maze. Fuller purposely avoids providing a clear arrangement of the space, so spectators have difficulties identifying the combatants. Before the battle begins, the setting is static and pervasively silent, generating an uneasy feeling, the proverbial “calm before the storm.” Once the shooting starts, the scene becomes rampant, showing “American and Japanese soldiers running and shooting in every direction” (Dombrowski 145). Due to the unclear geographic distribution and the rapid editing, viewers are confused about what is happening, who is shooting and who is being killed. The scene is resolved in a high-angle circular pan over the concrete blocks that follows a bewildered Second Lieutenant Stockton, who is astonished and unsettled by the “war's toll” (Dombrowski 146). Both scenes reveal Fuller's blunt aesthetic fingerprint when dealing with trauma: “direct, vivid, and emotional (to a point) . . . [proving] the absurd divide between being a human and a soldier” (Gordon 13). He does not sentimentalize, but rather presents a harsh portrait of the battlefield that exposes the toll to pay. He sought a crude realism that, instead of flattering the viewers, unsettles them; his films did little to explain the politics of the time, but primarily to awaken second thoughts on the motives for war. Thus, Fuller's portrait of war breaks with the expectations of the Hollywood war machine because it neither romanticizes nor rationalizes military conflict.

By seeking a realistic portrait of the battlefield, Fuller's war films diverge from the traditional conventions of the genre and reflect the contradictions of armed encounters, raising questions about their validity. They adhere to the idea that “the only glory of war is survival” (Server 4).

The centrality of this statement is perhaps what best defines his war movies. That is why, instead of appearing as traditional heroes, his characters are multilayered and ambiguous human beings; they present virtues, flaws, and contradictions recognizable in anyone. Rather than presenting soldiers as epic heroes, Fuller and his characters accomplish the opposite. They stand counter to the standards imposed by the Hollywood war machine.

Protagonists in *The Steel Helmet*, *Merrill's Marauders*, and *The Big Red One* become glaring examples of these anti-heroic figures. Sergeant Zack, in *The Steel Helmet*, is a rude loner with no emotional attachment, a characteristic that has kept him alive in combat. General Frank D. Merrill, the tough and ruthless colonel in *Merrill's Marauders*, knows that "sometimes, leaders have to hurt their own people." And Lee Marvin, in *The Big Red One*, plays the role of a hardened sergeant who became "the new post-Hiroshima military-men prototype . . . personifying the grim and violent reality imposed during the 1950s" (Roch 263). These three characters are multifaceted and have a greater complexity than what is typically portrayed in this type of film. They are far from the perfect, unrealistic movie heroes who were created during the cold war. Fuller's characters act out of survival, not heroism. They are tough, emotionless, crude, and marginal men enduring the most chaotic situations.

Moreover, Fuller shied away from general biases in his depiction of the enemy. He presents them as complete individuals, soldiers who are fighting for a cause, but not an American one. For instance, in *The Steel Helmet*, he allows the Korean prisoner to have enough dialogue and footage to show his complex identity: after being called Russian by sergeant Zack, the prisoner replies, "I am not Russian, I am a North Korean Communist." Later, when facing death, the same character redefines himself again to the medic as a "Buddhist." These scenes represent a respectful and egalitarian depiction of an enemy who is presented not only as the protagonists' foe, but also as an individual undergoing the same insane situation. In fact, the best example in which Fuller equates the enemy to the protagonist appears in *The Big Red One* when an American and a German sergeant give the same explanation about the soldiers' job: "We don't murder, we kill. . . . You don't murder animals, you kill them." This line epitomizes how Fuller understood the role of combat soldiers, one that is neither heroic nor idyllic, but rather a responsibility that exacts a complex physical and psychological price because of the chaotic and unexpected nature of the battlefield.

In short, Fuller's experiences as a soldier utterly defined his aesthetic and thematic aims when depicting war. Making movies was the strategy he used to cope with trauma and to "rationalize the unbearable inhumanity of war" (Gordon 15). He conveyed an uncouth portrait of warfare that, instead of following political agendas or genre conventions, posed the ethical

questions triggered by his own personal experiences.

The Soldier Who Could Explain War

According to Edmond Roch, Fuller's vision of war "was not the armies' and nations' fight, but the soldiers'. Their major, and sole glory, was to come back to explain it" (177). His films, though not overtly condemning war, strive to test war's validity when considering its human cost. This attempt is well illustrated in *The Steel Helmet*. The plot is set in 1951 during the Korean War (after World War II, Soviet communism spread to countries like North Korea that, in turn, invaded U.S.-backed South Korea). Within this historical context, Hollywood ideology pushed filmmakers to justify the war against North Korea. Overall, *The Steel Helmet* implies this ideology, but the film avoids directly condoning it and also includes the rooted shortcomings of American democracy, thereby sending an ambiguous message.

In two different scenes, the North Korean prisoner challenges the comparison of a black medic with an American-Japanese soldier. He points out that the American system does not recognize them as equal citizens. Their respective answers illustrate the ideals for which these soldiers are fighting. The black medic replies, "a hundred years ago I couldn't ride a bus, at least now I can sit in the back. Maybe in fifty years I'll sit in the middle, someday even up front. There're some things you can't rush." The American-Japanese answers, "I'm not a dirty Jap-rat. I'm an American and if we get pushed around back home. . . . Well, that's our business." The answers are different in tone: the black medic's is more optimistic, proving that some of the past injustices that black people faced have ended, and he evokes the possibility of future improvements in the system; the American-Japanese soldier, on the other hand, while professing his national identity and pride, calls for the resolution of these problems within the boundaries of the nation.

The Steel Helmet's ending also stresses Fuller's didacticism as well as his will to rouse self-reflection in his viewers. Rather than concluding the film with "The End," Fuller includes the image of the soldiers marching towards their new mission and superimposes an alternative ending: "There is no end to this story." He, "without being overtly critical with the war or his nation, suggests the disenchantment for a situation without prospects of finishing soon" (Roch 103). His stance in this movie is again ambivalent. The plot moves back and forth from two contradictory, yet necessary, extremes: the fight against communism and the reevaluation of democracy.

For the most part, *Merrill's Marauders* avoids making value judgements about the Vietnam War, except for its ending that is completely disconnected from the rest of the film. As readers will discover, this thematic incoherence has nothing to do with Fuller, whose intentions were to focus solely on the platoon and their experiences. Except for the conclusion, the film revolves

around the endless suffering of soldiers along with their will to survive. General Merrill epitomizes this attitude when he states to his exhausted platoon, “When you’re at the end of your rope, all you’ve got to do is make one foot move in front of the other.” In *Merrill’s Marauders*, Fuller’s lesson was not providing a political commentary, but foregrounding the endless and exhausting military profession.

The Big Red One, in contrast, clearly shows the reasons for fighting that war. Fuller conveys these throughout the whole film, but the most revealing scene is the one where the platoon, after defeating the Nazis, explores the concentration camp of Falkenau. Private Griff discovers a German soldier hidden where prisoners were cremated. The American soldier, absolutely astonished by the hideous crimes committed inside these crematories, shoots at the Nazi soldier repeatedly until the Sergeant reaches him and awakes him from this state of shock. Scene editing prevents the audience from seeing the dead soldier being shot, focusing rather on Griff’s psychological turmoil after discovering the ashes of prisoners inside the crematories. The scene reveals Nazi atrocities and emphasizes the need to fight against the perversity of totalitarian regimes.

Consequently, for Fuller, war is impossible to control or regulate by laws, policies, or governments, and “turn[s] [one’s] convictions upside down and inside out . . . [making people] grateful for every moment of existence you were granted” (*A Third Face* 188-89). Examples such as *The Steel Helmet*, *Merrill’s Marauders*, and *The Big Red One* prove that Fuller’s war films aimed to entertain, while educating viewers on the appalling reality of war and to make them aware of the world we live in. Nonetheless, his depiction of war is ambivalent because, while his films present war as profoundly chaotic and extremely violent, they cannot be considered pacifist propaganda. None of the films overtly condemns warfare, yet they do hint that modern democracies need armed conflict to defend their political systems.

As Gordon notes, “Sam Fuller’s war films matter, in part, because war matters . . . [and it] is surely the greatest ongoing paradox of the modern world” (19). Introducing that paradox into the public arena was precisely what Fuller aimed for in his war films. According to Margaret Cuonzo, paradoxes are constituted by “claims that, at least on the surface, have nothing wrong with them,” but together “involve some type of contradiction,” enhancing an inconsistency among them (6). One may think that daily life is exempt from paradoxes, but they “emerge in everyday sources” (Cuonzo 12); and “highlight conflicts between some of the beliefs we hold most dear” (Cuonzo 15). Fuller realized that American society blindly believed in the occasional need for war and did not question it. Consequently, drawing from his personal experience, his war films bring to the foreground the paradox

of warfare: they “probe its necessity as well as its absurdity” (Gordon 19). Precisely, his films’ inconsistencies excluded him from being identified with a given ideology, although the same films encountered numerous public complaints and objections when released.

A Filmmaker Goes Against the Tide

In general, Fuller’s contemporary critics misunderstood his atypical characters and themes as well as his idiosyncratic depiction of war, which went against the trends and fashions of the time. Overall, his ambiguity frequently aroused criticism from conservative and progressive pundits alike. On the one hand, the leftist critic, Calvin Green, wrote, “put quite bluntly, Sam Fuller is a chauvinist whose jingoistic fervor goes beyond the irrational, amounting to a morbid hysteria” (32). Other critics justified Fuller’s anticommunism as being something different from what it seemed. George Lipsitz stated that “Fuller views the American struggle against communism . . . as pre-eminently a confrontation with itself” (189). On the other hand, John Simon, who wrote for the conservative magazine *The National Review*, declared that “Fuller’s films . . . do not so much display ‘a primitive artist at work’ as they do a poster artist at his glaring worst. The dialogue is as simplistic as the ideology” (Cochran 136). This example leads David Cochran to point out that Fuller’s politics, along with his “taste for contradiction and confusion,” baffled right and left-wing critics alike (136). The controversy is the result of the ambiguity conveyed in his films. By provoking unsettling emotions and pushing the boundaries of the genre, Fuller aimed to emotionally shake viewers and to expose the truly paradoxical nature of war. His audacity and unconventionality caused them to be misunderstood. Critics, rather than considering him a challenging commentator of American military policies, defined him as a “maverick” or “primitive” (Gordon 3).

Moreover, the MPAA, which administered the ratings of movies, expressed concerns about the content of Fuller’s war films. Studio executives demanded changes in some of them—their critical reception was at the very least contentious, if not outright negative. Fuller’s career as a director began with the independent producer Robert Lippert, a West Coast exhibitor who owned a low-budget production company that mostly produced B-movies (Dombrowski 24).⁴ However, working outside the big-budget studio system afforded Fuller the wider thematic independence and the greater artistic freedom that led to his characteristic style (Dombrowski 25, Gordon 18). Fuller’s first war film, *The Steel Helmet*, was his third movie produced independently with Robert Lippert. It gave him the opportunity to broach the themes that he was most interested in. The story takes place during the Korean War, and was the first fiction film dealing with the conflict. According to J. Hoberman, when Fuller presented the script of *The Steel*

Helmet to Joseph Breen's MPAA office, which was in charge of cataloguing and assuring that films' content fulfilled the requirements of the Production Code, "there were a number of objections: Fuller's loudmouthed antihero Sergeant Zack used words 'gook' and 'lousy' and made a profane reference to Omaha Beach" (Hoberman 148). In fact, Hoberman argues that: "Fuller's sense of battlefield humor was hardly acceptable. . . . At the time, the Public Information Office merely noted that 'many opportunities are taken to show the service in derogatory light, not always with any foundation in fact or reality'" (148).

Later, the MPAA expressed concern in an office memo about perhaps the most controversial scene that features "Sergeant Zack, violat[ing] the Geneva Convention regarding the treatment of prisoners of war by murdering a Red Korean prisoner." (MPPA memo). In fact, this scene would become *The Steel Helmet's* "hot potato." The following office memo shows the agreement reached by Lippert and the MPAA regarding the scene: "Zack will be dressed down more severely for killing the Red prisoner of war," and concludes, stating: "this story . . . could cause serious damage to the international relations of the United States as well as . . . serious embarrassment to our State Department" (MPAA memo). Despite these objections, the deal between the MPAA and Fuller was set, and the controversial scene finally passed Production Code requirements. As the analysis of the film contents shows, *The Steel Helmet* depicts an "incidental" crime in which the character, "under great emotional strain, becomes momentarily crazed and kills a prisoner of war, for which he is severely dressed down by his commanding officer." (MPAA film analysis). All these hindrances reflect the internal struggles that Fuller and other filmmakers encountered within the film industry. The controversy exploded publicly in January 1951 with the film's release.

After the preview in Los Angeles, the *Daily Worker* commented that it "is pleased to view *The Steel Helmet* as an official statement, 'approved by the War Department in complete defiance of the Geneva Convention'" (Hoberman 150). In addition, *New York Times* reviewer Bosley Crowther stated that it displayed "confusion, acerbity and individual dread," indicating "some insight on that war" ("The Midwinter Stretch"). He goes on diminishing the film for its production values, which are so modest that a featured Buddhist temple "looks like a trap of tourists in Coney Island or Chinatown" ("The Midwinter Stretch"). The most inflammatory review, however, was by Victor Riesel who wrote a series of editorials criticizing the film and the scene in question. In one of these, the critic notes, "How can anyone talk of 'censorship'? . . . [the scene] then is civil liberties—a company makes a buck out of a film which shows an American soldier as a crazy killer" ("Plenty of

civil Liberties Here”). Two days later, in January 17, Riesel wrote a second editorial in which he addressed Fuller personally: “This is to tell him that neither I, nor the Army, nor the Hollywood labor people . . . are going to brush him off lightly . . . [He] has produced a movie which can do our soldier little good on the fighting fronts . . . [the film] seems to me to be a vicious portrayal of a wanton murder of war prisoners by a GP” (“Editorial”).

As Fuller recalled in an interview, “Well, the shit hit the fan! Truman or someone in the White House, and the Pentagon, raised hell with it . . . [Victor Riesel] said this picture is anti-American, pro-Communist” (Server 27). Against these accusations, Fuller used his status as a World War II veteran to defend himself; he sent a telegram to Riesel’s newspaper with his war record attached and stated: “I would like to know Victor Riesel’s war record . . . [and] I am anxiously awaiting a copy of [his] column carrying [sic] the charges against me so that I can sue him” (Telegram to Mr. Vogel). Fuller did not back down. He was aware of the debate triggered by the scene, but he was also confident because of the questions his movies posed. He was loyal to his views, pointing out “the insanity of war, [and] illustrating the absurd, desperate and irrational behaviors required of the soldier” (Gordon 14). Hence, Fuller’s first war film left no one indifferent, but all the disagreement was put aside because it “generated over \$2 million in ticket sales and earned Fuller an award from independent exhibitors for the top-grossing drama from 1948 to 1953” (Dombrowski 50).

In this controversy, Fuller came out on top; however, studio executives would interfere with his creative process and even impose changes in his future war films as their critical reception remained dismissive. With *Merrill’s Marauders*—“a well-founded production shot entirely in the very authentic jungles and swamps of the Philippines” (Server 89)—Fuller returned to work as a freelancer for a major studio, enjoying the technical benefits of bigger productions that “allowed the filmmaker . . . to exercise the genre’s capacity for spectacle” (Server 89).

Nonetheless, there was some discord between him and the studio executives about his creation’s tone and its violent depiction of war. The most glaring example of this disagreement is contained in the final scene. Instead of ending with soldiers marching towards the next mission—showing “their agonizing depletion by combat, disease and exhaustion” (Server 87)—producers Jack Warner and Milton Sperling “considered the ending a too bitter final brooch” (Roch 142), and changed the scene to include a military parade in New York narrated by a pompous voice exalting the victory of American troops in Burma. The change countered Fuller’s intentions in the film because, instead of focusing on the endless and strenuous job of the soldiers, *Merrill’s Marauders* became an orthodox war movie with the

propaganda tints that he always rejected. This time Fuller lost. Not only was he forced to abide by the executives' impositions, but he was also banned from working in the Hollywood studio system. He would have to wait eighteen years before returning to movie making with his lifelong and most personal project about war: *The Big Red One*.

Like his other war films, *The Big Red One* was not exempt from controversy in its production and reception, but it established Fuller as a film icon. It was set in motion in 1957 when Warner Brothers bought the rights and contracted him to write, produce, and direct it (Dombrowski 184). After reducing the script to fulfill 1950s standards and looking for sites in Europe, Fuller and Warner Bros. executives discussed whether it was feasible. Unfortunately, the studio expressed "tremendous concern" about the budget "and, ultimately Warner Bros. passed on the project" (Dombrowski 184-85). His lifelong venture was too expensive and too ambitious to be "logistically and financially feasible" (Dombrowski 185). Later, in 1961, it came back to the Warner Bros. offices. Milton Sperling and Jack Warner proposed that Fuller shoot *Merrill's Marauders* as a "dry run"⁵ before moving on to his big personal project (*A Third Face* 391). Nonetheless, as Roch notes, the creative differences between Jack Warner and Fuller in *Merrill's Marauders* prevented Fuller from directing *The Big Red One* in the 1960s (252). Consequently, he would still have to wait over a decade.

In the mid-1970s, and with the help of Peter Bogdanovich, Fuller again started to seek financing and, in 1977, Lorimar Studios, together with Gene Corman, a producer who specialized in war films, bankrolled and produced *The Big Red One*. When Fuller "delivered a four-and-a-half-hour final cut" (*A Third Face* 481), Lorimar declined it due to its duration and "brought in the editor David Bretherton to reduce the length to under 120 minutes without the input of Fuller" (Dombrowski 187). Even though Fuller agreed to the changes imposed by Lorimar, later film critics and intellectuals used these post-production events to construct and create the "legendary" aura behind the filmmaker. For example, Lee Sever states that "[*The Big Red One*] should have been Fuller's magnum opus . . . but it is held back from its potential greatness" by a restricted budget (93). Sever continues identifying "the post-production turmoil" as "the most destructive blow to the film;" and finally concludes that "*The Big Red One* is a distinguished and highly entertaining motion picture, but not the masterwork it might have been" (95). Although Sever's reasoning may be correct, Fuller dedicated most of his career to this project, so it is understandable that he accepted losing control and abided by the changes. As he put it: "Hell, I know you've got to accept compromise if you want to make motion pictures . . . Nevertheless, my longtime dream had finally come true" (*A Third Face* 483).

At last, *The Big Red One* was released in 1980 at the Cannes Film Festival, but its critical reception was not unanimous. On the one hand, the movie received positive reviews from different publications, such as *Newsweek* and the *Wall Street Journal* (*A Third Face* 482). *Variety* wrote that the film would “reach both those who will respond to Fuller’s artistry and mass audiences looking for strong action” (Review of *The Big Red One*). Richard Schickel from *Time* magazine also stated that Fuller let the scenes “work on his viewer’s minds, as they imagine the memories must have, over the years, on his own” (73). On the other hand, *The New York Times* continued its dislike: “The commercial cinema cannot afford to be too precious . . . [*The Big Red One* and *The Long Riders*] aren’t great films by any means” (Canby “The Peril”). Another *Times* review reads: “*The Big Red One* is both Mr. Fuller’s most spectacular and simplest movie to date . . . In any other context but Cannes, [the film] might not seem just simple, but simple-minded” (Canby “The Arty”). Once again, *The Big Red One* resulted in divergent opinions about its content. It is impossible to determine to what extent the changes in the editing room influenced these opposing views. Fuller’s vision was incomplete but, undoubtedly, the film fed the legend of Fuller, who wished that someday future audiences would have “the opportunity to see the movie I lived, wrote, directed, and edited with my heart and soul . . . before they render their final judgement” (*A Third Face* 483). This judgement finally came seven years after his death, when the reconstructed director’s cut was screened at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival.

The Perseverance of an Ambiguous, Upright Filmmaker

Fighting in World War II was the turning point in Fuller’s life. His beliefs in democracy and freedom led him to enroll in the Army, but his experiences as an infantry soldier, or rather as a “doggie” (a term he used frequently), transformed him deeply and defined what probably is the most recurrent theme of his career. The conventions of the genre point out the tendency of war films to romanticize and naturalize the state of war to legitimize and justify military intervention, thereby providing a coherent explanation for it. In this sense, Boggs and Pollard’s study demonstrates the fundamental role that the American studio system played, especially during the cold war period. Fuller’s production and the Hollywood war machine coincide, but the filmmaker steps outside of this trend because of his representation of war, rejecting the traditional conventions that emphasize ideas of heroism and patriotism.

For Fuller, there is nothing heroic or remarkably extraordinary in war. It is identified with uncontrollable and deranged situations that affect mental health and awaken survival instincts in its participants. These perspectives were so embedded in his persona that they shaped his aesthetic aims, despite

the genre conventions set by mainstream Hollywood. He was faithful to his experiences as a soldier to present realistic and harsh, but not flattering, battlefield depictions. In his films, war is not a succession of heroic deeds, but an unfathomable, unexpected, and deadly conflict, as these scenes from *The Steel Helmet* and *Merrill's Marauders* prove: a mine explodes killing a soldier while retrieving a dog tag from a corpse, and Second Lieutenant Lee Stockton contemplates the jigsaw puzzle of dead bodies created after the railhead fight.

Moreover, Fuller focused his films on the figure of the foot soldier to reflect the paradoxes of war and trigger the self-reflection of the audience. This constant awareness suggests that surviving is what really matters when one does battle in war. That is why, rather than heroes, his characters are survivors—human beings with contradictions, complexities, and fears who struggle daily to eventually return home and explain their experiences. The main characters of *The Steel Helmet*, *Merrill's Marauders* and *The Big Red One* embody Fuller's character-type, one that exhibits more psychological complexity than the conventional war hero character. Moreover, the enemies in Fuller's films suggest the same psychological complexity, diverging from conventions that tend to demonize rivals by presenting them as shallow or unskilled. Fuller portrays the enemy as another victim of the insanity of war, but one with a different ideology.

Yet, that is not to say that Fuller was a pacifist. With him, matters are not clear-cut, but hazy; by seeking realism, his films never completely disapprove of war. They suggest that armed conflict is essential to modern democracies in order to eliminate social injustice and totalitarian regimes as evinced in *The Steel Helmet* and *The Big Red One*. These movies illustrate the devastating effects war has on human beings, as *Merrill's Marauders* also proves when depicting the physical and psychological human cost of warfare. Fuller's goal is to enlighten spectators while entertaining them. Drawing from his traumatic experience as a World War II survivor, he endeavors to unveil the immorality of war as he proves its necessity.

Precisely because of Fuller's ambivalence, the aesthetics and the ideas he strove to depict were frequently polemical and negatively received. His films generally found little support from newspapers, whether conservative or liberal. When facing Fuller's ambiguity, critics tended to view them either as cheap communist propaganda or as manifestations of offensive, inflated patriotism. Moreover, his war films not only generated divisions of opinions among critics, but they also faced pressures and obstacles from the MPAA and the studio system, even to the extent of affecting his artistic purposes. *The Steel Helmet*, with its scene that breaches the Geneva Conventions, is a good example—one with a happy ending because Fuller finally achieved what he sought, despite the controversies during and after the production of the

film. Unfortunately, the cases of *Merrill's Marauders* and *The Big Red One* have a more unfortunate ending because he had to sacrifice his aesthetic interests to finish and release the films. In the first movie, the changes imposed by the studio executives distorted the tone Fuller had planned, transforming it into a more conventional war picture, but the outcome of *The Big Red One* was probably most discouraging to the filmmaker. This project embodies Fuller's experiences in World War II. It is his most personal and autobiographical film, and between the writing of the script and the production of the movie, twenty years elapsed. Nonetheless, once Fuller found the necessary financing for producing the film, external pressures damaged his aesthetic purposes. Studio executives excised his final cut to the standard 120 minutes, weakening his stylistic intentions. He dejectedly accepted the changes, so that viewers could see his lifelong project.

Throughout his career, Fuller strove for a grisly portrait of the battlefield through the eyes of the foot soldier who is no hero, but just a human being. This aesthetic stance went against the general trends and conventions of the time. In the 1950s, *The Steel Helmet* conformed to a bitter representation of a war that was supposedly just; *Merrill's Marauders* displayed the gruesomeness of war at the peak of the 1960s Vietnam War; and the 1980 *The Big Red One*, as American cinema reconsidered U.S. involvement in South Vietnam, showed the brutality of war. Given the conflicting messages of his films, Fuller may not be considered a pacifist or a warmonger. Instead, he stands between these two antipodes; his films make no direct statement for or against war. Despite all the deleted scenes, the pressures of the MPAA, or the opinions of the critics, the filmmaker was loyal to his impartial view. Throughout his career, he continued educating viewers as he laid bare the paradox of modern life. Fuller's consistency and perseverance is what casts him as an essential figure of the genre, one that used the traumatic experience of war to examine questions concerning contemporary societies and values.

Notes

¹ The director's cut of *The Big Red One* premiered at the 2004 Cannes Film Festival.

² All translations here are mine.

³ In his memoirs, Fuller references Roosevelt's speech to Congress after the attack on Pearl Harbor and the ensuing government decision to declare war against Japan and Germany.

⁴ According to Drombrowski, "B-pictures featured lower budgets, shorter shooting schedules, less established actors, and briefer running times than A-pictures and typically played at the bottom half of a double bill" (25).

⁵ A "dry run" is a military expression for military combat rehearsals before going into battle.

Works Cited

- Boggs, Carl, and Tom Pollard. *The Hollywood War Machine: U.S. Militarism and Popular Culture*. London: Paradigm Publishers, 2007. Print.
- Canby, Vincent. "The Arty and the Party of It All." Review of *The Big Red One*, directed by Samuel Fuller. *New York Times*, 20 May 1980, n.p. Print.
- . "The Peril of Being Precious." Review of *The Big Red One*, directed by Samuel Fuller. *New York Times*, 25 May 1980, n.p. Print.
- Cochran, David. *America Noir: Underground Writers and Filmmakers of the Postwar Era*. Washington: Smithsonian Institution P, 2000. Print.
- Crowther, Bosley. "The Midwinter Stretch." Review of *The Steel Helmet*, directed by Samuel Fuller, *New York Times*, 30 January 1951, n.p. Microfilm.
- Cuonzo, Margaret. *Paradox*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2014. The MIT Press Essential Knowledge Series. Web.
- Delgado, Manuel. Preface. *Películas clave del cine bélico*. Barcelona: Robinbook, 2008, pp. 1—23. Print.
- Dombrowski, Lisa. *The Films of Samuel Fuller: If You Die, I'll Kill You!* Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 2008. Print.
- Fuller, Samuel. *The Big Red One*. Directed by Samuel Fuller. United Artists, 1980. Film.
- . *The Steel Helmet*. Directed by Samuel Fuller. Lippert Pictures, 1951. Film.
- . *A Third Face: My Tale of Writing, Fighting, and Filmmaking*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2002. Print.
- . Telegram to Mr. Vogel. Date not available. Marty Weiser papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. Microfilm.
- Gordon, Marsha. *Film is like a Battleground: Sam Fuller's War Movies*. New York: Oxford UP, 2017. Web.
- Green, Calvin. "Samuel Fuller." *Cineaste*, 4.4 (1971). Print.
- Hoberman, J. *An Army of Phantoms: American Movies and the Making of the Cold War*. New York: The New Press: Distributed by Perseus Distribution, 2011. Print.
- Lipsitz, George. *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Popular Culture*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990. Print.
- Merrill's Marauders*. Directed by Samuel Fuller, Warner Bros., 1962. Film.
- MPAA. "MPAA Steel Helmet Film Analysis." Motion Picture Association of America. Production Code Administration records, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles, CA., 1950. Print.
- . "MPAA The Steel Helmet office memo." Motion Picture Association

-
- of America. Production Code Administration records, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles, CA., 17 October 1950. Print.
- Review of *The Big Red One*. *Variety*, May 14, 1980, n.p. Library of Congress. Print.
- Riesel, Victor. "Plenty of Civil Liberties Here." *Hollywood Citizen News*. Marty Weiser papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles, CA. January 1951. Microfilm.
- . "Editorial." *Los Angeles Daily News*, Marty Weiser papers, Margaret Herrick Library, Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Los Angeles, CA., 17 January 1951. Microfilm.
- Roch, Edmon. *Películas clave del cine bélico*. Barcelona: Ediciones Robinbook, 2008. Print.
- Schickel, Richard. "Belated Victory." Review of *The Big Red One*, directed by Samuel Fuller. *Time*, 21 July 1980. Print.
- Sever, Lee. *Sam Fuller: Film is a Battleground: A Critical Study, with Interviews, a Filmography and a Bibliography*. London: McFarland and Company, 2003. Print.