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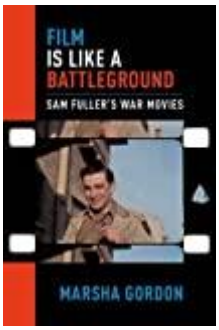
Marsha Gordon. *Film Is Like a Battleground: Sam Fuller's War Movies.* New York: Oxford University Press, 2017. ix + 314 pp. $99.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-026974-6.



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On May 9, 1945, Sam Fuller made his first war movie. He recorded his entry into the newly liberated Nazi concentration camp of Falkenau in Czechoslovakia. Years later he would turn the 16mm footage into a documentary entitled *VE + 1*. Fuller himself cites this experience of documenting both the atrocities and stakes of war as a foundational experience that informed his approach to filmmaking. After his time in the military, Fuller went on to make dozens of films, persistently returning to the subject of war. He explored its demands, its inhumanity, and perhaps most fundamentally its incomprehensibility.

Marsha Gordon, in her work *Film Is Like a Battlefield: Sam Fuller's War Movies*, examines the oeuvre of this often overlooked filmmaker. Gordon relies on auteur theory for interpreting the form and content of Fuller's films, though she acknowledges how this theory can be overdetermined. Auteur theory holds the director as a singular author in film production. Gordon's application of the theory makes sense on two fronts. First, because Fuller guarded his independence as a filmmaker even while working in the studio system, Gordon claims that his output hues rather closely to his personal views. Second, Gordon sites the recurrence of themes in Fuller's films throughout his career as evidence of an artist working out inner demons over the course of a career. This piece presents his body of work as a personal process of exploration.

Gordon brackets an examination of ten narrative, fictional films with two documentary films by Fuller. These nonfiction works made at either end of his career ground the verisimilitude of Fuller's fictive works. *Film Is Like a Battleground* spends much of its time recounting film plot points and major thematic imagery, which allows Gordon to make comparisons across films and examine the evolution of his filmmaking and storytelling style. Her analysis highlights how Fuller persistently returned to "the struggle for existence" and the "necessity" and "absurdity" of war (pp. 18, 21). While Gordon focuses on the films themselves as an artifact of Fuller's comments about war, she supplements this with be-

hind-the-scenes documentation and wide-circulation film reviews.

Gordon intersperses these deep film readings with assertions about the pressures that Fuller faced in filmmaking. She examines those studio executives and film critics who may have exerted pressure of Fuller or acted as guides or censors. How did the movie industry shape Fuller's work output? How did the public react to his art? To assess this Gordon relies on newspaper film reviews and internal memos. While the internal memos provide a window into studio perceptions of public opinion, analysis of the national culture is less surefooted.

This is not to hold Gordon to a standard she does not set for herself. At the outset this work declares its intention to examine how "Fuller navigated the American political landscape in relation to the subject of war" (p. 22). Yet there is no discussion of what that American political landscape was.[1] Moreover, Gordon repeatedly claims that she is not out to assess Fuller's "real politics," thus removing any sense of intentionality in the storytelling (pp. 21, 122). Fuller's motivations are presented as personal, not political. The reader is left with only the artifacts, devoid largely of context, though Gordon makes clear that films are not apolitical and that Fuller was using the medium to make political points. Because there is no real engagement with the wider cultural or political milieu nor a drive to suss out Fuller's personal politics, Gordon's piece acts as a comprehensive catalog of an artist's work. This examination could have made an interesting counterpoint to Christian G. Appy's "'We'll Follow the Old Man': The Strains of Sentimental Militarism in Popular Films of the Fifties."[2] Appy connects the trend in post-WWII film to portray the military as a wistful place of personal proving to a wider Cold War sentimentality toward the Armed Services in a time of perpetual war footing. Where Appy relates the morality of the visual storytelling to a cultural ethic, Gordon simply reads the films on the reader's behalf. This all points to the essential deficiency: the "so what?" question. Without a thoughtful and prescient application, Gordon leaves the audience wondering why they should invest time in this topic.

This work excels as an example of deep reading of visual culture and as a specific application of auteur theory across a body of work. For anyone looking to examine film as a historical artifact, this work will provide a model for analysis. Also, this work acts a detailed catalog of the work of a unique artist. Anyone studying twentieth-century American culture, especially the depiction of the military on-screen, will find this work helpful in thinking about how media portrays war. Finally, for specific studies of film in the mid-twentieth century, especially the sausage making of film production, this work provides a window into the pressures of producing art.

Notes

[1]. Some scholarship that might have helped establish the American political landscape include: Paul S. Boyer, ***By the Bomb's Early Light: American Thought and Culture at the Dawn of the Atomic Age*** (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Lizabeth Cohen, ***A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America***, 1st Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 2004); Mary L. Dudziak, ***Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy***, ***Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America*** (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); George Lipsitz, ***Class and Culture in Cold War America: A Rainbow at Midnight***, Praeger Scientific (New York: Praeger, 1981); and Douglas C. Rossinow, ***The Politics of Authenticity: Liberalism, Christianity, and the New Left in America***, Columbia Studies in Contemporary American History Series (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

[2]. Christian G. Appy, "'We'll Follow the Old Man': The Strains of Sentimental Militarism in Popular Films of the Fifties," in ***Rethinking Cold***

War Culture, ed. Peter J. Kuznick and James Burkhart Gilbert (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001).