

## “What Makes a Girl Who Looks Like That Get Mixed Up in Science?”: Gender in Sam Fuller’s Films of the 1950s

Marsha Gordon

Samuel Fuller’s well known definition of the cinema in Jean Luc Godard’s *Pierrot le Fou* (1965)—“Film is a battleground: love, hate, action, violence, death . . . In a word emotion”—provides an interesting springboard for this analysis of the nature of gender and relationships in not just his films of the 1950s, but throughout his career. It is precisely this cinematic duality that marks Fuller’s cinematic practice as a practice in battle with itself, as attempting to reconcile violence and desire. In Fuller’s most obviously “hot” war films, *The Steel Helmet* (1950) and *The Big Red One* (1980), war itself is defined as chaos. In these films, separated by thirty years in their production, chaos itself is a largely male problem to be worked out amongst men; female characters are not-so-curiously absent in both of these pictures. With the mise-en-scène of the literal battleground in place, there is little room for a female presence. All emotion—particularly love—is, quite simply, between men on the front.

The soldiers in all of Fuller’s 1950s and early 1960s films (whether literal, in the case of *Verboten!*, *Hell and High Water*, and *China Gate*, or symbolic, as in the case of *Pickup on South Street* and *Underworld USA*) are faced with a simultaneously disruptive and desirable component—the female body. Men are in part defined in these films by their ability to move between the spheres of the hyper-masculine and the heterosexual/domestic. These films depict the male protagonist’s attempts to make sense of these two worlds and his responsibility to each. The masculine preoccupation with war, “the enemy,” revenge, pride, thievery and/or patriotism must be abandoned as requisite phases in the cycle of male existence in order to move on to less onanistic and more proper realms of heterosexual desire.

*Underworld USA* (1961) is an oddity within this logic precisely because it ends with the death of the male protagonist before a proper consummation of heterosexual desire—a death at the hands of the male “corporation” upon which Tolly

---

MARSHA GORDON’S (University of Maryland, College Park) recent articles include “Onward Kitchen Soldiers: Mobilizing the Domestic During WWI,” (forthcoming, *Canadian Review of American Studies*), and “Cinematic Violations in Peter Greenaway’s *The Baby of Macon*” in *Enculturation* (Spring 1998).

has acted out his self-centered and stereotypically male revenge. In *Underworld USA*, which comes at the end of Fuller's 1950s cycle of films, women are left to do the work of the dead male protagonist on their own. These women, despite (or perhaps because of) their pasts, emerge as moral and capable when compared to male figures such as Tolly and his father—Fuller's is, after all, a relativist universe. In fact, Fuller's female characters are generally depicted as more "moral" than their male counterparts regardless of their engagement with underworld activities such as prostitution. Sandy and Cuddles are thus left to carry on a war of their own and to become a new kind of un-nuclear, un-related, and un-romantically involved family. If the heterosexual union in Fuller's films is rarely promising, then *Underworld USA* envisions the death of this union altogether. Perhaps this is an appropriate nod to the dawning of the 1960s and the sexual revolution from a filmmaker who was driven by the persistent battle of the sexes.

Fuller is a director who blatantly and incisively depicted the emotions and concerns of a decade, particularly if one considers the 1950s as an era replete with anxieties over everything from communism to shifting gender roles. While many directors subtly alluded to the concerns and fears circulating in American society, Fuller laid them on the table without hesitation or embarrassment. Though the movement of Fuller's camera has been the subject of some critical thought, the cinematic politics behind this movement remain obscured. This is especially the case in relation to issues of gender, and this is a particularly egregious omission given the centrality of these issues to Fuller's filmmaking. Depictions and perceptions of male and female identity are equally vital to an understanding of 1950s culture. An exploration of both the formal and narrative devices employed by Fuller reveals the ways in which these techniques reflect upon one of the central concerns of the 1950s as well as of Fuller's films: the tenuous nature of masculinity and femininity.

Fuller maintained an amazing degree of control over almost every aspect of his films due to their low budgets and through the use of his own production company, Globe Enterprises Production. This is in part what enabled Fuller to produce a cinema that was at once consistently blunt, unapologetic, and formally creative. Fuller was one of the few filmmakers to be credited regularly as "writer, producer, and director"; he released thirteen films during the 1950s. When viewed as a coherent body of work, Fuller's films of this era seem especially relevant in the context of 1950s battles over defining gender roles, informed as they were by post-war politics and an evolving sense of modernity. In the materialist commodity culture of the 1950s which relied so heavily upon polished images of domestic (in both senses of the word) well-being, Fuller offers a glimpse of what loomed under the surface gloss of American idealism and the commercialization of culture. Often appearing in the guise of cold war drama, the women and men that inhabit Fuller's world offer a brutal and perhaps surprisingly complex picture of masculinity and femininity in the process of social- and self-definition.

Fuller's films have, in fact, received only limited critical recognition in comparison to his contemporaries. The most vehement of this criticism was the attention paid him by his contemporaries of the French New Wave who, like Luc Moullet, considered Fuller "the complete *auteur* of almost all his films" (145). Fuller's ability to control much of his own material is lauded by those who see past some of

the cheapness that comes with the constraints Fuller operated under. Moullet explains that "In Fuller we see everything that other directors deliberately excise from their films: disorder, filth, the unexplainable, the stubby chin, and a kind of fascinating ugliness in a man's face" (*ibid.*, 149). There is a grittiness in Fuller's films that is generally absent from polished Hollywood high-budget films, especially of the period being discussed here. While *Look* magazine and the popular press lingered on American prosperity and beauty, Fuller opted to display the seamier—though equally mythological—side of American life. Fuller's films present an often cynical and critical picture of his contemporary world, however romantic even these cinematic interpretations may ultimately be.

Though not achieving traditional cinematic realism to the degree that more financially stable directors of the period manage to convey, Fuller's films do give the impression that he is placing his characters under more scrutiny, that the films are somehow representing "the real" with more (if not simply different) precision. While other directors could afford subtlety in image, Fuller was economically compelled to forego delicacy for directness. The result of this is often a cinema of extremes in which men and women are depicted in excess of their counterparts in dominant cinema, which at least in part accounts for those accusations of over-(or bad) acting that are often leveled at Fuller's films. On a formal level the close-up is an essential aspect of this urgent simulation of gritty reality, allowing the spectator to be moved into an immediate presence of the characters being depicted, sometimes to the point that we do, indeed, see the "fascinating ugliness of a man's face." The desire to call Fuller and his films authentic, though not unproblematic, is a direct result of the clear visual differences between his films and mainstream Hollywood productions of the time.

But are these "disorderly," "gritty," and "visceral" characteristics of Fuller's films simply symptomatic of "B" filmmaking? Or, more precisely, should Sam Fuller be considered a "B" filmmaker? Lea Jacobs points out that the B film began during the late twenties, when the double bill was instated to give the consumer "more bang for their buck." The institutionalization of differences between A and B features thus became "both a strategic judgment about the kind of profit that could be expected from a film . . . and, perhaps more amor- phously, an aesthetic judgment that the film was of a certain quality" (Jacobs, 8). Fuller's films of the 1950s, which represent the early and most prolific part of his career, were certainly judged both in terms of their aesthetics and financial circumstances. Nicholas Garnham points out that Fuller "has in general made what he calls programme pictures, B-features, he has worked fast and cheap and with one or two exceptions his pictures lack . . . production values" (26). Indeed, this lack of "production values" often results in minimalist scenery that, perhaps not incidentally, results in a focus on character and story that attempts to move beyond the physical limitations of mise-en-scène. The resulting emphasis upon character is part of what makes Fuller's films so fascinating and worthy of examination in the first place. These intensely kinetic character studies often focus on 1950s America's complicated gender relationships. The value of these films derives not only from what Fuller is saying, but also from his mode of articulation; the best example of this mode appears in the form of the close-up.

## PICK-UP ON SOUTH STREET AND THE CLOSE-UP ON GENDER

Fuller's use of the close-up in *Pick-Up on South Street* (Fox; U.S., 1953) is especially interesting for its gender implications. Throughout his cinema he often uses the close-up to portray interactions between male and female characters, particularly when trying to depict a suffocating atmosphere or the significance of a relationship in an economical and effective fashion. *Pickup* also makes literal a cinematic aesthetic that informs much of Fuller's work. In the film, the camera is frequently aligned with the process of interrogation. Fuller most often uses the technique to create a formal link between gender and ideology, and in doing so points out the ways that women's and men's roles have been guided by culture. In *Pick-Up on South Street*, greed-driven Skip McCoy (Richard Widmark) picks Candy's (Jean Peters) purse, accidentally stealing some top-secret microfilm that Candy is unwittingly transporting to Communist spies under the directions of her ex-partner, Joey (Richard Kiley). Candy is depicted as low class, trashy, and easy to manipulate. However, she shares with her female Fuller contemporaries a brash instinct and street smartness, which drives her character and results in her narrative survival. Throughout the film she acts as a go-between, as the critical link between the law (the police), the underworld (Skip), and the communists (Joey and his superiors). She is pushed back and forth between these sites of contention by male figures who, despite their reliance upon her, are the real instigators of the film's battle over possession.

Taken as a whole, Fuller's films depict society in constant war-like conflict driven largely by the underworld. *Pickup on South Street* represents a crime-laden, dirty-dealing underworld laced with communist spies. Despite its being a world of shady dealings and dames with names like Candy, the violence inflicted upon the female lead by both men in her life is deliberate and shocking, so much so that it played a major role in informing the film's reception and the ways in which the film marks gendered relationships. The eroticism of this film, as in many of Fuller's other projects, seems in fact driven by the erotic impact of the bruised or otherwise brutalized female body. (Though in most of Fuller's films the damaged body is female, *Verboten!*, which will be examined later in this article, reverses this scenario by initiating desire with a wounded male body. Sandy also tends to Tolly's wounds in *Underworld USA*, however their relationship is absolutely familial, as Sandy attempts to be a mother to Tolly.) As in the other Fuller films that will be discussed here, men and women are not treated with traditional Hollywood signifiers of romance. As Garnham notes, "there is a notable absence of soft light and sweet music in Fuller romances. They are conducted against the harshest of backgrounds: subway trains, the damp hard wooden slats of a waterfront pier, and a hospital bed are the setting for Skip and Candy's romance" (79). Relationships between men and women reflect the world in which the characters live, a world inevitably characterized by its brutality and inhumanity.

As contemporary critics noted when the film came out, *Pickup on South Street* does not present a pretty picture of relationships between men and women. In a *New York Times* film review, Bosley Crowther notes that the film uses Widmark in "a savage, arrogant role, but also uses Jean Peters blandly as an all-comers human punching-bag." Crowther goes on to note that not only is Candy repeatedly

slapped around but "that this is treatment that Miss Peters seems to adore." The *Variety* review offers a similarly dismal picture of the violence perpetrated upon Candy, stating that Fuller has Widmark "push Miss Peters around a couple of times for the presumed amusement of the customers . . ." (20). *Variety's* phrasing of the "Presumed amusement of the customers" suggests that the audience accepts and enjoys this violence; even Crowther attributes the rendering of these scenes to the actress' own sense of masochistic pleasure. The undeniable violence of this film—and the sense that it affects both actress and audience—is facilitated by the use of the close-up. But the camera itself is interrogating this behavior by foregrounding it in this fashion, thus bringing it self-consciously to the spectator's attention. Fuller, in other words, seems intent on pointing out how much the camera can contribute to the violence enacted upon his characters.

The opening subway train sequence of the film demonstrates nicely the relationship between the close-up, gender, and violence. As Skip moves in to pick Candy's purse, there is a series of extreme close-ups. A close-up of a perspiring and wide-eyed Candy precedes a close-up of Skip, which is followed by a medium close-up of the detective watching them both. This series of close-ups works to create a claustrophobic and intensely closed-in *mise-en-scène*. The close-ups also visually mark Candy as sexual and naive, and Skip as manipulative and smooth. Thematically, this series of shots depict an act of personal violation. The viewer is in on this act of violation precisely because of Fuller's occasional insertion of a cutaway to Candy's purse. But in its formal composition (the extreme close ups, the soft lens, the weirdly matching eye-lines and the nearly equal screen time allowed to each character), the series of shots also becomes oddly romantic. In a fairly condensed and completely silent bit of filmic space, Fuller has told the story of gender relations as they "may" exist. Men and woman are, in Fuller's world, simultaneously in violation of one another and romantically connected. Fuller's deliberate linkage between romance and violence inverts the traditional romantic use of the close-up in mainstream Hollywood cinema of this era. In the process, Fuller questions the ideological violence that underlies these overly idyllic relationships.

These alternating close-ups establish a mood for the film and a framework for male/female relations; however, other close-up sequences function more symbolically in their relation to the process of interrogation, a form of violence that is also linked to desire. When Joey asks Candy questions about losing the film on the subway, it is Candy who is shot close-up, with her back against a wall; Joey is filmed in medium close-up. When Candy and Joey meet at the "communist office," multiple close-ups show a sweating, angst ridden and panicked Joey under pressure from his communist commanders. The close-up is again used as an interrogation device when Skip visits Candy in the hospital. As Skip tries to get explanations out of her, the camera zooms in to Candy's bruised face. The bruises here appear as a mark of desire since Candy's willingness to take a beating for Skip is what makes her legitimately desirable to him. The camera reflects the desires of the interrogator, moving closer and closer to the "truth" that lies behind the character's face.

The interrogator in *Pickup on South Street* is exclusively male. In fact, when Candy attempts to take on this role she fails. Candy asks, "How'd you get to be a

pickpocket?" Skip's response is to physically throw her away to resist, perhaps, the interrogational and scopical power of the close-up. Skip responds: "How'd I get to be a pickpocket? How'd you ever get to be what you are? Things happen, that's all." In effect, Skip takes over Candy's interrogation and makes it his own by re-articulating the question to himself. This allows him to not only avoid the questions and the close-up, but to turn the situation around by transforming the scene into an interrogation of Candy. Both unable to answer questions of origins, questions which attempt to figure out why people are what they are, the scene ends in a kiss shot in absurdly close close-up. Kissing scenes are often scenes of interrogation in Fuller's films, as will be discussed in relation to *Underworld USA* and *China Gate*. Interrogation and violence almost inevitably climax in an acting out of desire between men and women.

The close-up (or lack thereof) functions as a formal reflection of interrogation in these scenes, but Fuller's camera also works to reflect the actions and desires of his male characters. Throughout *Pickup on South Street*, the camera functions as a site of masculine perspective. When Joey comes to Candy's apartment and is attempting to get her out of the bathroom before the film's most violent beating scene, the camera mirrors Joey's emotions—it is clearly agitated, bouncing around, and moves in for an abrupt close-up of Candy in the bathroom, prefiguring the interrogation to come. Earlier in the film, when Skip is about to push Candy away from him after she tells him she's only brought \$500 to get back the film, the camera pulls back, anticipating and perhaps welcoming Skip's violent shove. Through these repeated formal devices it becomes clear that the camera is functioning as a violent, interrogational masculine double. Fuller's interrogational aesthetic asks questions about 1950s morality and gender relations, and asks them with a violence and urgency rarely witnessed in cinema's history.

These shots also tend to anticipate the violence enacted upon Candy, a violence which contemporary reviewers noted for its excessiveness. Such excessiveness is demonstrated when Skip returns to his shack to find Candy snooping about for the missing film. Skip enters the shack and immediately punches Candy in the face. But the scene is filmed in such a manner that it is the camera, or perhaps the spectator, that is being hit. This seems to be the one point of the film in which the camera "becomes" female. Once consummated, however, the act of violence firmly re-establishes the masculine prerogative of the gaze: Candy's body is examined, her purse is searched, and she becomes the object of Skip's interrogation/desire. This device works to further assert the powerful violence of Skip, here not only damaging Candy but the apparatus, as well.

Ultimately Candy becomes Skip's savior or redeemer, not an uncommon role for Fuller's female characters. In order to "save" Skip she too must become violent, hitting Skip over the head in order to take the microfilm from him and hand it over to the police. She also takes the responsibility of creating a false morality for Skip, telling the police that he's been struggling with something "inside" him and has decided to do the right thing. Though it is hard to tell how long her purification of Skip's character will last, Candy does emerge as a rather pathetic heroine, willing to sacrifice herself entirely for a man who has shown her nothing but violence mingled with greedy, manipulative charm. As such she stands out in the films being examined here, which are typified by willful female characters who

act as more than errand girls for their corrupt boyfriends. In fact, though all of the women in the films being examined here have highly problematic and virtually inexplicable romantic attachments and attractions to men, Candy comes off as the most spineless and most abused character. Perhaps this is due to the formal devices that, in a sense, work against Candy. Since the close-up is used so frequently as a device of containment and violence in *Pickup on South Street*, Candy becomes a casualty to the device by remaining its object throughout.

#### HELL AND HIGH WATER: MASCULINITY IN EXCESS, FEMININITY IN DISTRESS

Most of *Hell and High Water* (Fox; U.S., 1954) takes place in the claustrophobic and contained space of a submarine, where a battle over gender roles and identity is played out against the CinemaScope backdrop of saving the world from nuclear war. In this film, Fuller takes the sense of closed-inness that is suggested during the early subway scenes in *Pickup on South Street* to an extreme. The film revolves around Adam Jones (Richard Widmark), who is leading an expedition to remote islands in the Arctic waters where it is rumored that Communists (here Chinese) are testing atomic bombs. Nuclear scientist and Freud look-alike Professor Montel (Victor Francen) and his multi-lingual scientist partner (and unacknowledged daughter) Denise (Bella Darvi) come along to determine whether or not there really is a nuclear presence. Eventually the crew discovers a conspiracy plot in which the United States is to be blamed for a nuclear bomb attack on Korea or Manchuria.

Of course, Jones and his crew manage to thwart the evil communist plot. In doing so, however, the subplot that revolves around gendered interaction seems both immensely more complicated and unresolved. When not actually engaging with the overt problem of communism or nuclear holocaust, the majority of this film revolves around an almost absurd number of testosterone-driven sailors vying for the romantic company of Denise. Like *Pickup*, this film links violence (or the threat of it) to sexuality. Once Denise interrupts the hyper-masculine space of the submarine, her very presence makes gender an "issue." Denise enters the narrative in a classic Fuller shot descended from the genre of the noir with its visual dissection of the female form: her legs are slowly revealed as she descends into the submarine hull via a ladder, garnering the near-salivating crew's attention. In answer to some crew members' objections that having a woman on the ship is bad luck, Denise responds to their interrogation in a rather curious way: "I am a scientist before a female." Within the context of 1950s notions of femininity and proper female roles, Denise's response creates an interesting division in which her very gender must be displaced, at least symbolically, for her intellectual, professional role to be taken seriously. Of course the joke is that Denise is irrepressibly female, especially in the eyes of the sailors, as Fuller points out through some rather grotesque ogling scenes. The division she articulates between gender and career in fact collapses immediately; her role as a scientist and thus not-female is easily overcome by her role as a female who is both desirous and, ultimately, as a female who desires.

Within the closed-in and isolated space of the submarine, Denise's femaleness articulates itself in the ways that Laura Mulvey has described women in classic

Hollywood cinema in terms of “to-be-looked-at-ness” (19). Denise is rarely on the screen without a reverse shot in which a man is “devouring” her with his eyes. Her presence thus disrupts the “natural” relay of (male) gazes on two levels: in the decidedly male space of the submarine and in the cinematic space of the war film, the genre into which this film might most appropriately fit. She almost always becomes the center of the frame when she is on screen, a distraction, at best, from the war against communism despite her central role in the “free world” efforts. The previously unmediated gazes between men are lost, in a sense, as the sailor who objects to Denise’s presence points out by expressing his inexplicable discomfort at a female presence in this space. Denise thus becomes the focus of both character and spectatorial gazes, throwing off the centrality of the male figures with the displacing visual lure of the female body.

Jones, who of course falls for Denise, asks Professor Montel a question that further puts Denise’s femininity on the spot in both visual and social terms: “What makes a girl who looks like that get mixed up in science?” Reaffirming dominant binary constructions of the day in which women were linked with private and domestic occupations such as family and home, and men were linked with public and active occupations such as science and war, Jones struggles with his desire for what is clearly understood by him (and the film) as an “unnatural” woman; a woman who is both desirable and whose femininity is called into question by her involvement in the masculine profession of science. Such cultural beliefs are echoed in a contemporary review of the film by Moira Walsh that appeared in *America* on February 20, 1954, in which Denise is described as Professor Montel’s “improbably female and still more improbably pretty assistant” (546). Denise’s very presence on the submarine as a female scientist is further described as “desperately contrived” (546). In the film’s terms, Fuller seems to answer his own filmic question, however conservatively: science is just a substitute for the real thing—a receptive male body—that Denise ultimately finds on board the submarine. Within the context of 1950s cultural notions of gender roles, Denise (as a woman scientist) is unnatural but “curable.”

Denise’s astuteness does, indeed, threaten the exclusive bonds and the supremacy of the male society aboard the submarine. Due to her multi-lingual fluency, Denise is (to everyone’s surprise) able to interpret the men’s clearly sexist and phobic comments about her (though they remain un-translated for the equally frustrated spectator) and respond to them in a way that embarrasses and humbles the previously self-righteous commentators. She is also the subject of fights between the men as they flex their muscles in an attempt to win her over. It is this almost collective homosocial objective to impress Denise that creates an interesting spectacle throughout the film. Painting masculinity as a performance that revolves around excess, Fuller provides his spectator with countless scenes in which sweaty, partially clad male bodies fill the frame. Coupled with outbreaks of what can only be described as stereotypical male jealousy and rage, men appear to be constantly trying to define their masculinity through physical aggression of some sort. In other words, Denise’s presence seems to justify this display of so-called manhood inasmuch as she becomes the signifier for a problematic womanhood that acts as a catalyst for men to act out their own masculine identities.



Denise and Jones end up "together," and by the film's end it is Jones' gendered identity that comes under question. After the plane carrying the nuclear bomb is successfully shot down, accidentally killing Professor Montel along with the communist plot, Jones dismisses the Professor as a mere casualty of war, not realizing, of course, that Montel is actually Denise's father. Overcome with grief and outrage Denise asks him, "What kind of man are you?" Though this question has a literal connotation within the narrative, it more importantly reinforces the meta-question that the film asks concerning gender and social identity. The question is as much "what kind of woman am I?" as it is "what kind of man are you?" since both gender categories are addressed and questioned by the narrative. Within the social imagination of 1950s mainstream culture Denise is not, as has been demonstrated, a comprehensible "kind" of woman. The category of domesticity that dictates that women participate in the production of babies and amuse themselves in the "Populuxe" atmospheres of the home, to borrow a term from Thomas Hine's book about 1950s commodity culture of the same name, does not have a place for Denise as the "kind" of woman who looks the part but acts outside of its dictates. However, Denise's own questionable identity throws doubt on the stability of all previously "safe" gender categories, Jones' not excluded.

By film's end, it seems as though the film promises a potential containment of Denise's "distressing" femininity and a reaffirmation of Jones' manhood, as well. Since her father has now been killed off in the conclusion of this properly Oedipal plot line, Jones can now take Denise "home," which is the submarine's final destination. This narrative ending—of the romantic couple returning together—adheres to more traditional 1950s notions of gender roles and Hollywood conventions, as well. But the conclusion does not foreclose upon the gender dilemmas initiated by Denise's presence. As a reviewer notes in *Commonweal*, "every sequence is fraught with danger . . . because of the presence of this woman scientist characterized as a genius with a body by Fisher" (524). Denise is threatening not only due to the paradox that she represents—a beautiful woman who is not docile, domestic, dumb, "easy," or passive—but because she is intruding into this previously self-sufficient male community and is designed specifically to appeal to the men's consumer-oriented sensibilities.

When her father is incapacitated earlier in the film, it is Denise who successfully confirms the radioactive presence on the island through her gadgetry and computation. It is no wonder that the crew of the submarine (as well as the film's reviewers?) is so shaken up by her presence since their preconceived notions about gender in general, and femininity in particular, are destroyed by this singular presence. Denise is thus absolutely essential not only to the film, but to the mission that "saves" the world from nuclear war. Perhaps the *Newsweek* film reviewer is correct in arguing that, "It [the picture] proves, among other things, that a beautiful young woman can raise a certain amount of hell simply by going to sea with a submarine crew" (106). Indeed, the hell Denise raises may be more accurately described as the direct result of the repressive and containing atmosphere of 1950s domestic and gender ideology; an atmosphere paralleled in its claustrophobic potential by the imagery of the submarine in crisis in *Hell and High Water*, stuck waiting on the bottom of the ocean with a dwindling supply of Oxygen in order to avoid its enemy.

MEN AT WAR?: *VERBOTEN!* AND *CHINA GATE*

All of Sam Fuller's films can be read as either literal or symbolic versions of the war film. As an established genre, the war film of the 1940s and 1950s is typically marked by an absence of serious, central female characters, especially in those films that take place in the "field of battle" and not at "home" (read: America). In *China Gate* (Fox; U.S., 1957) and *Verboten!* (RKO Radio/Columbia; U.S., 1958), however, women play pivotal roles and, as in *Hell and High Water*, challenge certain assumptions that underlie this decidedly male genre. What makes both of these films distinct from other war films is the fact that they merge the "war" film with the "domestic" drama, as Lucky of *China Gate* and Helga of *Verboten!* (both clearly attached to their national identities) are interested in creating for themselves, in their connections to American men, a new domestic identity. In both films, the main female character proves essential not only to the "greater moral cause" underlying the films, but to the humanizing struggles of the slightly less effective male figures that rely upon them for their own identities.

*Verboten!* takes place at the close of World War II in Germany. American Sergeant David Brent (James Best) falls in love with a non-Nazi German woman, Helga (Susan Cummings), who cares for his wounds and conceals him from the Nazis. Brent eventually decides to stay in Germany and marry her, since she will not leave her ailing mother and brother behind to go to the United States. Helga is first introduced through a rhyming shot in which her image is paired with a photograph of Hitler—quite an uncharacteristic introduction of a female character in terms of Fuller's conventions. Helga is slowly humanized after this ominous introduction as she cares for and conceals Brent. When finally asked to articulate her relationship with Brent, she reveals that it was initiated out of the basic desire to survive in what is depicted as a devastated and desperate post-war Germany. Brent is attractive as a provider, as a means to supply Helga with food and supplies. But Helga eventually realizes her feelings for Brent and ultimately serves as a purveyor of truth to her Hitler-youth brother, Franz (Harold Daye), resulting in the dismantling of the growing Hitler-youth faction.

Helga becomes an indoctrinator of truth and morality (a rather Victorian role) as it is presented in the form of the Nuremberg trials. She brings her brother to the trials and has him watch a film that, in a matter of minutes, sums up the atrocities perpetuated by German Nazi's during the war. This fascinating sequence composed of genuine war footage, at least some of which was shot by Fuller during the war, is also narrated by Fuller's own voice. By acting as educator to her brother, Helga ultimately is responsible for dismantling the organized Hitler youth gang, the Werewolves. But Helga is also a double for Fuller himself in this scene, for his goal with this film is clearly to bring the atrocities of World War II into cinematic light in a very frank and un-Hollywood manner. Helga presents the truth of the war to her brother and the spectator, acting as educator and redeemer—a role not unusual for Fuller's female characters. She also redeems herself in the eyes of Brent, who has turned against her due to his own fears of being exploited.

Helga is, in many ways, a version of the classic female Fuller character: the woman who will do anything to survive in her given situation and, in doing so,

the character who usually does survive. In fact, Helga does use her femininity to ensure that Brent will provide her material comforts. This control over Brent is reflected formally in one scene in which Helga and Brent appear in the frame only for Brent to disappear, supplanted by a close-up of Helga. By eclipsing him on screen and by exploiting his resources as an American soldier involved with supplies, Helga takes the active and dominating role despite her surface-level, submissive appearance. Helga marries Brent to ensure that her role as German mistress will be solidified and more importantly to guarantee that her supplies will keep on coming. Brent suspects such manipulation, and finds it particularly devastating because it calls into question his efficacy as not only a soldier and an American but as a man, as well.

Helga's importance within the narrative is also highlighted because Brent loses his military position after getting into a physical confrontation with some protesting Germans. As Phil Hardy puts it, Brent is "reduced to inactivity on the sidelines. It is Helga...and Franz...who finally save him and put an end to the Werewolves" (61). Brent's role as protector and provider—as traditional, authoritative, and powerful male—is thus supplanted by Helga and Franz, the former who is truly responsible for "saving the day." This masculine ineffectuality is foreshadowed in Brent's first meeting with Helga. After being wounded and stumbling through a German town, Brent enters a war torn house to find Helga in front of him; the sight of her causes him to faint. Garnham describes Brent's reaction as confirming the role of women in terms of sanity and care-taking in Fuller's films: "The sight of a woman is linked to the idea of safety, and his drive to keep going evaporates" (98). As is typical of Fuller's depictions of male/female romantic attachments, nurturing thus serves as an initiation of desire.

Brent's masculinity and effectiveness as an American is further challenged by Helga's discovery that she is pregnant. Already attached to German soil by her sick mother and her dependent brother, Brent's challenge is to sway Helga into coming to the United States to raise their child. This becomes even more complicated by Brent's suspicions about Helga's motivations for being with him in the first place. Brent eventually decides to cut Helga loose, but only after she's born his child, whom he then promises he'll take to the United States—the ideal destination for all of Fuller's child-characters. Brent can only imagine reclaiming his damaged masculinity by asserting an American paternity. Nationalized fatherhood is envisioned as compensatory for his failed role as husband, soldier, and man. Much as Helga is originally conflated with images of Hitler, Germany itself becomes a symbol for emasculation and ineffectualness through the failed American body of Brent. It is only on American soil that Brent can imagine reconstructing his damaged identity through the assertion of a new identity as father.

*China Gate* is yet another film obsessed with notions of paternity and with the transportation of a child to America. It is also another war movie, though a decidedly cold war movie, that takes a woman as its central figure. Like *Hell and High Water*, *China Gate* introduces its female lead in grand Fuller fashion: a close up on high-heels and a slow pan of Lucky Legs' (Angie Dickinson) namesake with classic "dame music" in the background. Lucky Legs, a cognac-loving Eurasian bar owner in war-torn Indochina (the "*China Gate*"), re-encounters ex-American soldier Brock (Gene Barry) whose multi-racial, multi-national unit she is supposed

to lead to a Communist bomb and arsenal stash so that it may be destroyed. Five years earlier, Lucky was deserted by her then-husband Brock after bearing him a child with “Asian features”—a surprise for Brock who assumed that he would have a “white baby.” At first rejecting this new mission due to Brock’s presence, Lucky reluctantly signs on after negotiating a deal in which her son gets to go to America (land of the free, home of the brave) in exchange for her leading the men on their mission.

*China Gate* and *Hell and High Water* share much in terms of their narratives and the gender dilemmas raised within them. Like Helga in *Verboten!*, Lucky lives in a war torn world and she is stuck there primarily because she has family (here, a son) to look after. Like Helga, Lucky survives due to her own ingenuity and, it is implied, through her feminine charm. But Lucky’s story is much more related to Denise’s in *Hell and High Water*—she is a woman on a “man’s mission” and her presence as a woman (and a part Asian woman to boot) on this mission is questioned despite her essential role. Saying that Lucky is essential to the mission is, however, a bit of an understatement considering that she is the only one who is able to negotiate the communist soldier- and mine-ridden territories that separate the “liberators” from the arsenal.

This position of knowledge and power combined with beauty and femininity makes Lucky, like Denise, a complex and often troubling figure for her fellow characters. As one communist soldier says to her, “I’ve never heard of any man say no to you [sic].” Lucky’s ability to negotiate the treacherous communist landscape is attributed to her ability to convince men to do things, and this power to convince is attributed to Lucky’s femininity and desirability. As the only woman in a male landscape, Lucky commands respect precisely because of her female identity (and visible whiteness), not despite it. She is not, after all, a stereotypical female figure in terms of her behavior on the mission. She is brash, resourceful, brave, unsqueamish, witty and “jungle-smart.” Despite these aspects of her character rumors still circulate that link Lucky to prostitution—an assumed profession of many of Fuller’s female characters, especially those who manage to live well under otherwise dreadful circumstances. Within the narrative it seems that linking Lucky to prostitution is a form of compensation for male anxiety—the implication being that she’s been able to get what she wants, but only by using her body since no man can say no to her. Regardless of her sexual past, Lucky speaks her mind and speaks her way through a dangerous communist landscape, which is enough to throw Brock into a crisis of his own.

Once the other members of the unit learn that Brock once deserted Lucky, they begin to turn against him. After all, Lucky is proud of her Asian heritage and it is only Brock’s behavior that makes her question her own identity. As she puts it, “You’re the only person who’s ever made me feel ashamed. Ashamed of my mother, my race, myself.” Gender and race are here the two central components of “self,” and Brock’s presence causes Lucky to question her own identity in both of these terms. Lucky is always articulate, asking the right questions and giving the right answers. When Brock tries to explain his position, however, he is ignorant, bigoted, and comparatively inarticulate: “Oh you’re tough. You handle explosives. But you’re not tough enough to handle life, Brock.” Lucky challenges Brock’s masculine identity as career soldier and explosives expert, mocking his

obtuse view of life. His competence in the public arena is, in Lucky's terms and in the minds of the other soldiers, undermined by his shoddy performance in the private arena.

But Brock seems to "learn his lesson," announcing his decision to remarry Lucky and take "the kid" (as he affectionately calls him in the third person) back to the States. But Lucky's ready acceptance of this offer seems farcical. Though she too easily succumbs to Brock's weak compromise, her inexplicable decision to accept Brock is typical of Fuller's females who become overwhelmed by their desires for rough and tumble men. With their mission nearly complete, Brock's dynamite lines are cut by communist soldiers and Lucky, determined that her son will make it to the States, runs a suicide mission by detonating the explosives with her own hands. With Lucky out of the picture, we realize that the narrative of *China Gate* has been leading up to this moment, has been about the making of a "real" man and a "real" father from the scraps of a war-torn soldier. The final scene of the film shows Brock with his "Chinese" son walking hand in hand, off to America. With Lucky literally "out of the picture," Brock claims what Brent in *Verboten!* aspires to: paternity. And like Brent, Brock locates this paternity in the United States, a place where men can be men and women can be women. In war, cold or hot, such gender divisions are fractured though their structures may stay in tact, as can be evidenced by a character such as Lucky. The 1950s ideological manufacturing of gender roles is simply incompatible with wartime situations—be they missions to expose communist plots, basic wartime survival, or destroying communist ammunition reserves. It is thus logical that the men in Fuller's films want to "go home" to America, where they can recover both their gender and national identities.

#### UNDERWORLD USA, MOTHERLESSNESS, AND THE TURN-OF-THE-DECADE

"Every film must have a message. Maybe I'm too didactic. If so, too bad."

—Sam Fuller quoted in Phil Hardy, *Sam Fuller*, 32.

*Underworld USA* is, as previously suggested, a culmination of Sam Fuller's 1950s films. In *Underworld USA*, a powerful crime syndicate that rules the entire city replaces Communists. The cold war is over, but an equally formidable and well-organized opponent has merely supplanted the enemy. The narrative centers on a chronic hoodlum and crook, Tolly Devlin (Cliff Robertson), who witnesses the murder of his father when he is a boy. Despite Sandy's (Tolly's father's girlfriend played by Beatrice Kay) efforts to straighten Tolly out, he ends up spending most of his time in jail, plotting revenge upon his father's killers when he gets out. After finding one of his father's killers on his death bed and making him "name names," Tolly spends the rest of the film insinuating his way into the mob and plotting his destruction of the other three men involved. On the way he saves a troubled blonde informant named Cuddles (Dolores Dorn) and, after treating her cruelly throughout the film, eventually plans to marry her.

What sets this film apart from Fuller's other films of this era in terms of its treatment of gender is the film's fascinating obsession with maternity. Maternity is

central to Fuller's female characters' understanding of the worlds they live in. Of course, Lucky is concerned with her role as mother in *China Gate* as is Helga in *Verboten!*, but in *Underworld USA* bearing children becomes an unusually obsessive part of the fantasy of American domesticity and a way to move outside of the "underworld." Sandy, as Tolly explains, can't have kids of her own so she fills her home with an absurd number of dolls and baby pictures. She tries mothering Tolly; but he is clearly a child of the streets, an "underworld" kid who is fated to a criminal life. Sandy's dolls and pictures are haunting; they fill huge portions of the frame and often visually overwhelm characters. When Cuddles is first brought to Sandy's house to recover from a near-fatal beating, she is frightened by the dolls as is reflected by a series of disturbing, Hitchcockian close-ups of the dolls which give the impression that Cuddles is encircled by these menacing figures. Indeed, the shots of the stuffed birds in Norman's parlor in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960) closely resemble the shots of the dolls in *Underworld USA*.

The dolls do seem to have an affect on Cuddles, who eventually ends up telling Tolly about her desire to bear him children. Tolly is shocked by this declaration, having written Cuddles off as a plaything, a prostitute who did him a favor, certainly not the type of a girl a respectable hoodlum like him would marry. Tolly initially saves Cuddles from being killed by a syndicate hit man, Gus (Richard Rust). Pretending to be a narcotics agent and thus aligning himself with the law, Tolly gets Cuddles to provide him with information and then secures her at Sandy's home to allow her to recover from her beating and keep her from the syndicate. As in *Pickup on South Street* Cuddles is the subject of many interrogations, most of which end in a torrid kissing scene. As has been discussed, Fuller repeatedly makes this connection between interrogation and kissing, between the violent quest for information and male-initiated desire. Cuddles is no exception to this theory, as she is made to provide information and subsequently becomes willing to provide Tolly with herself. These interrogational battles—over both knowledge and desire—reduce male and female behavior to a base exchange that strips bare the polished interactions that usually comprise Hollywood on-screen courtships. Interrogation is also coupled with the less violent and masculine performance of nursing, as Tolly treats Cuddles' wounds in order to further provide himself with information.

As is characteristic of most of Fuller's men, Tolly mistreats Cuddles. He calls her a "stupid little broad," repeatedly asserting his control over her and making her perform acts that will work in his favor. At one point, Cuddles models a new outfit for Tolly and follows his commands to "turn around" and to "sit over there." Like Candy in *Pickup on South Street*, Cuddles willingly follows these commands. But also like Candy, Cuddles resorts to physical violence, slapping Tolly only to end up telling him that she wants to "climb out of the sewer" in order to "live like other people." This proposition clearly posits the self-conscious otherworldness of Fuller's characters. The suggestion is, at least in part, that the other world beyond the sewer promises a different life complete with different possibilities for heterosexual relationships. It is here that Cuddles sees the possibility of having Tolly's kids through a reconfiguration of the barrenness of the underworld.

Tolly's response to Cuddles' proposition is laughter. It takes Sandy, stepping in to question Tolly's identity, in order to make a proper couple out of these two

misfits. Sandy questions Tolly's moral superiority, asking him what right an ex-con and petty thief has to judge someone else's moral character. Sandy articulates a vision of Tolly that diminishes him in terms of his self-righteous, hyper-masculine, gangster identity: "You're a midget. In your heart, in your head, in your whole make-up. You're a midget." After Sandy literally attacks his character in ways reminiscent of Lucky Legs' speech to Brock in *China Gate*, Tolly resolves to propose a "partnership" between himself and Cuddles, which she readily and enthusiastically assents to. Only without a clear sense of male identity, which Tolly unsuccessfully searches for throughout the film's revenge plot, can he submit to marrying Cuddles. Sandy, an unsuccessful maternal figure, must first wound Tolly's masculine pride before he gives in to marrying Cuddles. Cuddles' submissiveness contrasts Sandy's assertiveness, just as Cuddles' realistic desire for children contrasts Sandy's obsessive and unrealized fantasy for the same.

Of the relationship between Cuddles and Tolly, Fuller states that, "I like the sex in the picture between Robertson and Dolores Dorn. You know, he laughs at her and says, 'Me? Marry a hooker?' Then, when he changes his mind, I wanted to get it so lackadaisical. I wanted an effrontery to human feelings. He says, 'Oh all right. A guy needs a partner. O.K., we'll get married'" (qtd. in Sherman and Rubin, 160-1). Cuddles' relationship with Tolly is indeed the most inhuman romantic pairing in all of Fuller's films. The desperation of both of these characters is especially unparalleled in Fuller's films of the 1950s. Even Candy and Skip from *Pickup on South Street* seem ultimately to have a relationship that is at least based upon desire, however violent that desire is. In *Underworld USA* desire has been replaced by the mechanics of the corporation—in Tolly's suggestive words, they will be "partners" instead of a couple. Tolly's character, in fact, lacks humanity in general. His almost rote drive for revenge makes him insensitive to anything but this single-minded plot. His is a life driven by revenge and a desire to reconnect to his father, a death drive that is realized by the end of the film.

At film's close Tolly is shot by a syndicate man and dies in the same alley as his father, thereby finally achieving a literal reconnection with his father. Cuddles and Sandy, who briefly visit the death scene, walk away from the scene (and the film) intact. These women outlive the men in this film, most of who end up brutally murdered. Cuddles even retains the stereotypical role of the redeemer by promising Sandy that she will live on to testify against the syndicate and thus to vindicate Tolly's death. In terms of the film as a whole, *Underworld USA* presents a bleak picture of masculinity and paternity, both unrealized and ineffectual. Equally bleak, however, is maternity, which fails in every instance including the exclusion of Tolly's real mother from the picture altogether. In fact, the notion of the family is destroyed in *Underworld USA*, even more than in Fuller's other films that are centered upon the non-existent or dysfunctional family.

In all of the films examined here there is a seemingly innate drive to create a family, either through marriage or childbearing. Hardy argues that in Fuller's film "the major means of progress back to society is through the acquisition of a family—rather than the starting of a family" (72). Though I disagree with Hardy's division between acquiring and starting a family, he does rightly point out the centrality of the family to Fuller's view of American identity. In *Underworld USA* this familial drive is made monstrous and impossible. From Sandy's grotesque

affection for inanimate children, to Tolly's equally sick and single-minded desire to enact revenge for his father's death, the family is beyond reparation. That the image of two broken and utterly alone women ends the film is a signal that the prospects of family—however bizarre or mutated they appear in other of Fuller's films—have been utterly abandoned in *Underworld USA*.

*Underworld USA* thus seems conscious of its historical placement at the cusp of a new decade, at the decline of an era characterized by the creation and multiplication of the nuclear family. The film's opening music, "Auld Lang Syne," becomes a motif signifying patriotism and for Tolly revenge; moreover, it is a song sung at the closing of one era and the opening of a new one. Even the idea of newness is symbolized by the celebration of the New Year with which the film opens and by Sandy's desire to bear children. Because it is such an utterly bleak film in terms of male/female relationships, it functions as an accumulation of Fuller's imagining of relationships throughout the 1950s. *Underworld USA* takes notions of male and female identity to their extremes, and the destroyed family structure is held up as a spectral reminder of a 1950s ideal, utterly un-idealized and emptied of its original meaning.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank Robert Kolker and Devin Orgeron for their generous help with drafts of this article. I would like to acknowledge the indispensable resources of the Library of Congress, without which I could not have seen many of Fuller's out-of-print films.

## WORKS CITED

- Anderson, Christopher. *Hollywood TV: The Studio System in the Fifties*. Austin: U of Texas P, 1994.
- Anonymous. Rev. of *Hell and High Water*. *Films in Review* (April 4, 1954): 195.
- . Rev. of *Hell and High Water*. *Newsweek* (Feb 22, 1954): 106.
- . Rev. of *Hell and High Water*. *Commonweal* (Feb 26, 1954): 524.
- . Rev. of *Pickup on South Street*. *Variety* (May 15, 1953): 20.
- Belton, John. "The Shock Troops of Style: Fuller, Sirk, and Ulmer," *Cinema Stylists*. New Jersey: Scarecrow, 1983: 119–135.
- Clark, Randall. *At a Theater or Drive-In Near You*. New York: Garland, 1990.
- Crowther, Bosley. Rev. of *Pickup on South Street*. *The New York Times Film Reviews*. New York: New York Times, 1968. Review date: June 19, 1953.
- Cross, Robin. *The Big Book of B Movies*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981.
- Garnham, Nicholas. *Samuel Fuller*. New York: Viking Press, 1971.
- Hardy, Phil. *Samuel Fuller*. New York: Praeger Publisher, 1970.
- Hine, Thomas. *Populuxe*. New York: Knopf, 1986.
- Jacobs, Lea. "The B Film and the Problem of Cultural Distinction," *Screen* 33: 1 (Spring 1992): 1–13.
- McCarthy, Todd and Charles Flynn, eds. *Kings of the Bs: Working Within the Hollywood System*. New York: Dutton, 1975.
- Moulet, Luc. "Sam Fuller—sur les brisées de Marlowe" ("Sam Fuller: In Marlowe's Footsteps"). *Cahiers du Cinéma* 93 (March 1959). Rpt. in *Cahiers du Cinéma: The 1950's: Neo-Realism, Hollywood, New Wave*. Ed. Jim Hillier. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1985: 145–155.



- Mulvey, Laura. "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989: 14–28.
- Rubin, Martin and Eric Sherman. *The Director's Event: Interviews with Five American Film-Makers*. New York: Atheneum, 1970.
- Sanjek, David. "'Torment Street Between Malicious and Crude': Sophisticated Primitivism in the Films of Samuel Fuller," *Literature/Film Quarterly* 22: 3 (1994): 187–194.
- Sarris, Andrew. *Politics and Cinema*. New York: Columbia UP, 1978.
- . "Samuel Fuller." *Directors and Directions 1929–1968*. New York: DaCapo, 1996: 93–94.
- Walsh, Moira. "Hell and High Water." Rev. of *Hell and High Water*. *America* (February 20, 1954): 546.
- Wood, Denis. "The Bodies We Keep Tripping Over: Critical Commentary on Sam Fuller's *The Big Red One*," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 9: 1 (Spring 1981): 2–12.