# Contents

# Introduction

man eyes a woman on the subway. She returns his gaze. Two other men watch. A pocketbook is picked.

An outlaw shoots his best friend in the back, then proposes to his girlfriend.

A woman furiously beats the camera with her bag to the sound of wailing saxophones. Her wig falls off. She is bald.

An African-American pulls a white pillowcase over his head and cries, "America for Americans!"

A woman's face cracks like a broken mirror, shattered by a gunshot.

A young solider pumps round after round into a Nazi hiding in a concentration camp oven.

A newspaper editor pummels a man against the base of a Benjamin Franklin statue.

A sergeant shoots a prisoner of war, then yells at him, "If you die, I'll kill you!"

With their startling subject matter and emphasis on conflict, contradiction, and kineticism, Samuel Fuller's films are designed to hit you—hard. His stated goal was to "grab audiences by the balls!" By upending expectations, disregarding conventional norms, and combining realism with sensationalism, violence with humor, and intricate long takes with rapid-fire editing, Fuller created films that produce a direct emotional impact on the viewer. He wanted to unsettle the assumptions of audiences, to surprise them, to instruct as well as to entertain, always striving to reveal the truth of a given situation. His are daring and stimulating films, and they have inspired fascination in generations of fans.

As the recurring narrative and stylistic tendencies in Fuller's films are so readily apparent, his work has repeatedly been the subject of auteur study. In the late 1950s in France, the young lions at *Cahiers du Cinéma* discovered in Fuller a prime example of the delightfully aggressive nose-thumbing they celebrated in Hollywood's genre pictures and began to describe his aesthetic as primitive. When structuralism inflected auteur criticism in Britain and the United States a decade later, a collection of essays

edited by David Will and Peter Wollen for the 1969 Edinburgh Film Festival, as well as monographs by Phil Hardy in 1970 and Nicholas Garnham in 1971, refocused attention on the motifs, themes, and dichotomies in Fuller's narratives, elevating his stature as one of the preeminent cinematic critics of American society.[1]

This book aims to rethink earlier portraits of Fuller by examining his films in the context of the practices and pressures of the industry in which he primarily worked: Hollywood. In doing so, I am following in the footsteps of scholars such as Paul Kerr, Justin Wyatt, Lutz Bacher, and others who have demonstrated the necessity of considering auteurship in relation to economic, industrial, and institutional determinants.[2] I draw on in-depth formal analysis as well as previously untapped primary sources, including script, production, payroll, legal, and regulatory files; trade and popular publications; and interviews. This book focuses on Fuller's directorial work in film, and as such necessarily neglects much of his vast written output for page and screen, as well as his television efforts. A particular emphasis is placed on understanding the narrative structure and visual style of Fuller's films, as these topics have previously received little systematic analysis.

As a writer, director, and frequently, producer, Fuller had multiple means of creative influence over his films, a situation that was highly unusual for directors of his era, particularly those operating—as he often did—in the low-budget arena. Though he labored in a wide range of production circumstances for more than forty years, Fuller's many-layered involvement in his films contributes to the distinctiveness of vision exhibited by the totality of his work. Within the history of American cinema, Fuller is the model of the idiosyncratic director, one whose films frequently push the boundaries of classicism, genre, and taste. His work contains the potential to reveal the contemporary limits of what is considered socially and aesthetically acceptable to present onscreen.

Fuller did not direct in a vacuum, however, and his filmmaking was molded by competing influences whose nature and weight varied over time. Fuller began his directorial career in the late 1940s during a transitional period in the American film industry marked by the decline of the studio system and the rise of independent production. The changes in Fuller's working conditions and degree of production control allow for an examination of how economic, industrial, and institutional forces impact a director's aesthetic tendencies. The recognition that multiple causal determinants shape the nature of Fuller's work is crucial to explaining its variation in form and relation to classical conventions and production trends. Such an approach acknowledges the director as a conscious craftsperson engaged in formal decision making while con-

strained by rival concerns, providing an alternative to conceiving of authorship strictly according to the director's biography, psychology, or choice of recurring motifs.

The length of Fuller's career also enables an assessment of the opportunities and challenges facing directors in the decades following the 1948 Paramount antitrust decision, which prompted the major studios to cut payrolls and move toward financing and distributing independent productions. Rather than drawing all of their cast and crew, equipment, and other resources from a single studio, producers now assembled the means of production on a film-by-film basis, each time creating a distinct "package."[3] Fuller provides a case study of the impact of the shift to the package-unit system on a director's films and career, revealing that operating as an independent producer or freelance talent—rather than as a director under contract to a studio—could both aid and frustrate creative expression and professional development. In particular, Fuller's case complicates the promise of artistic freedom associated with incorporation as an independent producer while offering a corrective to popular conceptions of studio-director relations as obstructive to individuality and innovation. While the details of Fuller's case are specific to him, the choices he faced when navigating the changing industrial landscape in Hollywood were shared by fellow directors emanating from the world of low-budget B movies. Industrial determinants can partially account for the fates of Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher, Joseph H. Lewis, Phil Karlson, Andre de Toth, and Jacques Tourneur—gifted filmmakers who, like Fuller, struggled to maintain their careers by the 1960s.

Like cultists everywhere, Fuller followers tend to seize on those elements in his films and his biography that most excite and use them to proselytize the cause. So Fuller becomes a filmmaker ahead of his time; one who makes movies that reek of headline-blaring tabloids; who transforms every picture into a war picture; who is a primitive, an outsider, a maverick. There is some truth in these characterizations, but as a newspaperman would say, they don't tell you the whole story. A close examination of Fuller's body of work reveals greater variety and complexity than is generally acknowledged. My goal in this book is to account for the total Fuller: those films and portions of his career that match his legendary persona, as well as those that do not. While Fuller's primary artistic impulses remained consistent throughout his professional life, the manner and means through which he expressed them differed over time. The following discussion of Fuller's biographical legend, his aesthetic interests, and his working methods lays the foundation for a long-overdue analysis of his rich and influential legacy.