

# Fuller's anti-"isms" in pickup on south street



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As The Red Scare infiltrated American culture and consciousness in the 1940's and 50's, few prominent players within the Hollywood film industry dared to challenge the accusations of the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC); the fear of losing credibility and being blacklisted even ruffled the feathers of Bogey, arguably one of the most powerful presences on and off screen during that era. But it was Sam Fuller's gritty 1953 crime film, *Pickup on South Street*, which rose to the challenge of McCarthyism: through the tough, independent, street-wise character of Skip McCoy, Fuller not only questions the motivations of these finger-pointing patriots and their opposing Communist sympathizers, but he also questions the very notions of dogmatic belief itself. In *Pickup on South Street*, Fuller's Skip McCoy is quickly established as an outcast from society: apart from being a pick-pocket recently released from the joint, " he lives in a (barely) converted tackle and bait shack overhanging the river. It is connected to the mainland [only] by a long plank" (Shadoian 222). Instead of having a bed, Skip sleeps in a hammock that hangs above his unfurnished flooring and walls which are decorated only with few small pictures of movie stars like Marilyn Monroe. "[Skip's] home is a symbol of his independence" (Shadoian 222), and Fuller makes it clear that he has no ties or loyalty to anybody other than himself. Appearing perfectly content in his isolated tackle and bait shack while drinking beer from his makeshift refrigerator in the " drink", Skip is immediately thrust from his quiet life in the shadows onto the bright center stage. After picking the wallet of the unsuspecting Candy while on the subway, his accidental acquisition of the Communist's microfilm places the outcast directly between the sights of both the Communists and the U. S. government. With both parties after the microfilm, it is the FBI's Agent Zara

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with the aid of Captain Tiger who reaches Skip first. While Tiger merely seems concerned with putting away Skip for life on petty charges, the FBI's Zara seems more interested in the apprehension of the microfilm. But to humor the FBI agent and possibly even further his career by imprisoning Skip for good, Tiger plays along with Zara's desire to help out his country. Much like Senator McCarthy who pretended to be seeking out "reds" for the safety of The United States, (but really only to further his political office), Tiger's performance as a patriot who is willing to put aside his feelings of loathing for Skip is just an act in attempts to eliminate his opposition. But when Skip refuses to admit that he has the film, realizing both Tiger's insincerity and its possible monetary worth, the true patriot Zara steps in, saying: "Can't you see how important this is? If you refuse to cooperate you'll be as guilty as the traitors who gave Stalin the A-bomb." Skip quickly responds firstly to Zara, and then to Tiger, saying: "Are you waving a flag at me? I know you pinched me three times, (to Tiger), you're trying awful hard with all this patriotic eyewash." At this point in Fuller's film, Skip is unaware of the microfilm's contents, yet he does know that it contains information of extremely high importance to the U. S. government. This is made clear by Zara's question, (to Skip), "Do you know what treason means?" with Skip responding, "Who cares!" Even after Skip goes to the New York Public Library and discovers the contents of the microfilm, that still does not change his actions or opinions towards helping his country. Through the aid and employment of the oblivious Candy, the Communists are the next to find Skip at his shack. After being knocked out by Skip on her first visit, Candy later returns with \$500 given to her by Joey who hopes to buy the film back. When Candy offers Skip the \$500, he jumps to his feet and violently pushes

her away, saying: " You tell that Commie I want a big score for that film... so you're a Red, who cares? Your money's as good as anybody else's!" Fuller not only uses Skip's individuality to set him apart from the American " flag-wavers" (As Skip calls them), but also the Communists. Skip does not care what is at stake for either side politically—" [he] ridicules abstract concepts of politics and patriotism" (Shadoian 223), and he simply cares to draw the maximum price from the highest bidder regardless of their ideologies. In this sense, " by living outside conventions, he has kept himself from becoming a machine" (Shadoian 223). Skip's independence and refusal to believe in these dogmatic principles does not paint him as either " colorless, distasteful, or mocked" like the police and Communists (Shadoian 223), yet instead Fuller presents this pickpocket as the true hero of the film—the only person who is able to resist the fear mongering perpetrated by each side. " One expects that by the end he'll see the light" (Shadoian 223) and come to defend his country, but this never comes to fruition, even after his meeting with Moe at the coffee shop. Sitting at a long counter, Moe asks Skip: " What's the matter with you, playing footsie with the Commies?" to which Skip replies, " You waving a flag too?" Although Moe may be the only character that Skip respects due to their similar situations, even after she tells him that the line " must be drawn somewhere...even in our crummy business", Skip still refuses to jump on-board with Moe's anti-communism ideology, " which is underlined as ignorant. She doesn't know anything about Communists, only that she doesn't like them" (Shadoian 224). And Fuller suggests that his character's refusal to wave his American flag is perfectly okay, that his rejection of these paranoia-inducing machines is what actually keeps him human (Shadoian 224). Fuller presents both American patriotism

and Communism equally as having " similar disregard for human values and for the human beings who have accidentally become entangled in their political skullduggeries" (Shadoian 227). The only humanism or saving-grace remaining in Pickup is produced between the developing relationship between Skip and Candy. When Candy reveals to Skip that she is in the hospital because she refused to tell Joey where the tackle and bait shack was, Skip has his prime moment of realization. At this instant, for the first time in the film we see Skip drawn away from being an outcast as he makes his move into society, falling in love with Candy. The light that Skip sees is not that he must defend his country, but that he must defend the woman who protected him. As Skip and Candy's love binds with their kiss in the hospital bed, the " human connectedness" (Shadoian 225) that Moe tried to sell earlier through her ties is finally achieved. Skip avenges Candy's beating from Joey and Fuller never reveals what happens to the microfilm. To Fuller, what happens to the microfilm is insignificant because " the world goes on as before" (Shadoian 226): the Americans and the Communists will continue with their pointless rivalry and go on producing fear in the hearts of their enthusiastic advocates. In a film released during the Red Scare, one would expect for its overall message to be patriotic and anti-communist, but " Fuller is not against communism as such, but against ' isms' in general" (Shadoian 223). Pickup on South Street warns of the dangers of dogmatic ideology—it cautions that an uneducated or rigid belief in certain principles can lead to dehumanization and a loss of individuality. Instead, Fuller uses both Skip's resilience to patriotism and the relationship between Skip and Candy to show that above all, what is most important is the love and humanity shared between people. Although they may be social outcasts,

Skip and Candy are the only characters in the end to escape from Fuller's film both happy and free. Works Cited Shadoian, Jack. " Pickup on South Street (1953)." Dreams and Dead Ends: The American Gangster/Crime Film. Ed. Cambridge, MA: The MIT P, 1979. 221-232. Alden Library Electronic Course Reserves.