

THE CINEMA OF **NORMAN MAILER**

Film is Like Death



Edited by **JUSTIN BOZUNG**

B L O O M S B U R Y

THE CINEMA OF NORMAN MAILER

Dear Norman,

There will be all kinds of very literate people around you who will be very skeptical, openly and deviously, of your “film work.” DO NOT LISTEN TO THEM. There will be those who will say that all you are doing is splashing your god damned personality across the screen like a god damned exhibitionist. Don’t listen to them. Some of them are simply fools, but most of them are too close to you (personally or thru your writings) to know what your film work really is. And those who will be helping you with your films—cameraman, editors, etc. – they will tell you (and they will sincerely feel so, god damn idiots) that THEY are the FILM-MAKERS, and you are a WRITER, and that although they may not be as good film-makers as you are a writer, they, nevertheless, at this stage, they KNOW more about WHAT CINEMA IS, than you, a poor beginner! DON’T BELIEVE THEM. You wouldn’t make a big mistake if you’d take for granted that ALL PEOPLE WHO ARE HELPING YOU ON YOUR FILMS know NOTHING, GOD DAMN NOTHING about what cinema IS. Follow this rule, I am telling you this as a good uncle... from my life experience, and from listening to the party ramblings last night, and from watching your work. Your film work is fresh and solid and real and earthly humorous and the best thing that has happened to narrative cinema since Andy Warhol and Godard. And whatever & wherever it goes wrong, I can almost detect some of the “film-makers” fucking fingers.

Jonas Mekas, Filmmaker and Co-Founder of the Anthology Film Archives, USA

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For **NM**

A film-maker first, a writer second . . .

"Film is legitimately more interesting than books."

NORMAN MAILER



Figure 0.0 Norman Mailer, a philosopher first, a film-maker second, and a writer third in Provincetown during the shooting of his final film, 1987's *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

FOREWORD BY MICHAEL CHAIKEN

This is a revised and extended version of, 'The Master's Mercurial Mistress, How Norman Mailer Courted Chaos 24 Frames per Second,' which first appeared in Film Comment magazine July–August 2007.

Nearly 60 years have passed since the publication of *The Naked and the Dead*—the debut novel that launched a career practically unparalleled in American letters. Norman Mailer, twenty-five at the time of the book's issue, would go on to be known as a quick-change artist par excellence. Among other guises, he was the high priest of hip in the 1950s with *Advertisements for Myself*; Machiavelli to Kennedy's *Lorenzo de' Medici* in *The Presidential Papers*; Petronius in his descriptions of the grotesquerie of American political theater in *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*; and, devil's advocate with his last novel, *The Castle in the Forest*.

Mailer's love affair with the written word has been lifelong, but for a time he kept a mistress. In the 1960s, he directed a trilogy of underground features: *Wild 90* (1968), *Beyond the Law* (1968), and *Maidstone* (1970). Dismissed by critics and audiences alike at the time, and rarely screened over the last four decades, these films today reveal a personal aesthetic without precedent—one that demystifies the filmmaking process and, with gallows humor, gets at the very taproot of cinema itself. Mailer self-financed these features, hiring documentarians D.A. Pennebaker, Ricky Leacock, and Nick Proferes to shoot and Jan Welt and Lana Jokel to edit, putting himself in the starring roles alongside a cast of amateur and professional actors, ruffians, socialites, demimonde figures, Warhol starlets, pugilists, black radicals, drinking buddies, and a infamous celebrity midget. "Making a film," Mailer would tell Joseph Gelmis in the 1970 book *The Film Director as Superstar*, "is a cross between a circus, a military campaign, a nightmare, an orgy, and a high."

Film would lead Mailer to Hollywood in the summer of 1949 when he relocated in an attempt to bring *The Naked and the Dead* to the screen. He had been to Hollywood once before—one year earlier on a campaigning trip for Progressive Party candidate Henry Wallace. It was then that he first met Mickey Knox, a bit actor who would become a lifelong friend and a key player in Mailer's turn to filmmaking. Knox helped to introduce Mailer to Burt Lancaster (who he had hoped to cast as 'Lt. Hearn' in his screen adaptation of *The Naked and the Dead*) and other members of the Hollywood Left, who adopted Mailer as their own. By the time Mailer returned to Hollywood, the studio system was beginning to fall apart. Wrestling with a follow-up to his international best-seller, Mailer found himself working for Samuel Goldwyn, who had contracted him and Jean Malaquais, Mailer's close friend and mentor, to loosely adapt Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*. Mailer and Malaquais worked on a script for the better part of the year, with Montgomery Clift in mind for the lead role but, as recounted by Malaquais to Peter Manso in his 1985 book *Mailer: His Life and Times*, their partial draft was rejected by Goldwyn for its "seditious," anti-American implications. (*Lonelyhearts* was eventually made with Clift in 1958; *The Naked and the Dead* came out in 1956

with Cliff Robertson in the role of ‘Lt. Hearn’ and directed by Raoul Walsh—one of his last, and, in Mailer’s estimation, worst films.) Mailer returned to New York and set to work on completing his second novel, *Barbary Shore* in 1951. His experience out West would become grist for his promised “Great American Novel,” *The Deer Park* in 1955. One of his best works about the vicissitudes of Hollywood amidst the decaying morals of the rich, powerful, and famous, and intended as the first part of the continuing saga of its narrator ‘Sergius O’Shaughnessy.’ Profoundly influenced by the music of Thelonious Monk and Sonny Rollins, the pansexual philosophy of Wilhelm Reich, and the burgeoning drug counterculture, Mailer would author some of his most celebrated essays and works of short fiction in the 1950s. A co-founder of *The Village Voice*, he also sat on the editorial board of Irving Howe’s left-leaning *Dissent* magazine, where his legendary, polarizing essay “The White Negro” first appeared. *Dissent*’s editors included Cinema 16 founders Amos and Marcia Vogel, and Mailer became an infrequent visitor to their screenings, where he was introduced to the poetic documentaries and avant-garde films that were the staple of the Vogels’ programming.

When Cinema 16 closes its doors in 1963, Jonas Mekas, then critic for *The Village Voice*, lured Mailer to his Film-Maker’s Cinematheque showcases at the Charles Theatre on Avenue B. There Mailer was exposed to underground films by the likes of Ron Rice, Robert Downey Sr., and Stan Brakhage. Smitten with Mekas’s programs, Mailer would even invest money into the film-maker’s future ventures. He would help to fund films by Ron Rice and Downey. Two works that made a lasting impression on him were Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising* (1963) and Andy Warhol’s *Kitchen* (1965)—the former for its aesthetic daring, the latter for its sheer lack of artistry whose bottomless quality seemed to contain for Mailer “all the horror of the twentieth century.”

A virtual polymath in his ability to apply himself to every literary form, Mailer came to cinema almost by natural extension, fueled by an awe-inspiring hubris and with money to burn. Mailer’s *The Deer Park: A Play*, starring Rip Torn and Mickey Knox, was staged from late 1966 and into 1967 at the Theatre de Lys in New York, giving Mailer the opportunity to watch director Leo Garen and his cast deliver wildly emotive and powerful performances night-after-night. What became ritual after many of the performances was a gathering of cast and crew at a nearby bar in Greenwich Village, Mailer along with Knox and Bernard “Buzz” Farbar, his two closest friends in the cast, would sit at the bar and get deep in their cups adopting the roles of two-bit, downtrodden mafioso trying to outdo one another in a game of the “Brooklyn dozens.” In their drunken logic, convinced that this was the stuff of cinematic greatness, Mailer, Knox, and Farbar conspired to make a film out of their wasted improvisation. From such humble beginnings, Mailer’s career in film was born.

Mailer’s admiration for the cinematography in *Monterey Pop* (1968) led him to documentary filmmaker D.A. Pennebaker, who offered his services and a cache of film stock for \$1,000 and a profit share in the finished film. Shot over four nights in, and edited by Jan Welt and Mailer between July and October 1967, *Wild 90* follows the exploits of “The Maf Boys”—Buzz Cameo (Farbar), 20 Years (Knox), and The Prince (Mailer)—low-level thugs trapped in a room planning their next big heist. Like Sartre’s *No Exit* on a booze-induced bender, the film is a gestalt of galoot poetics, direct cinema, and lowbrow comedy with three drunkards launching a barrage of profanity—laced repartee and virulent put-downs. With nary a drop of Italian blood between the trio, the film devolves into a comic and frighteningly exaggerated acting-out of Italian mafiosos stereotypes as interpreted by three Jewish guys from Brooklyn. Mailer, sounding like Paul Muni trying to pass a kidney stone mixed with Bert Lahr’s ‘The Cowardly Lion’ is central throughout—admonishing his two cohorts with taunts of “You’re nothin’, but a guinea with a hard-on in your arm” and “You hurt my feels.” Helping to keep the threadbare plot moving, the Maf Boys (Mailer’s answer to Warhol’s *The Chelsea*

Girls of 1966) are visited by a series of characters (including boxer Jose Torres and Pennebaker as a Protestant police chief) involved in various nefarious activities. The film reaches its apotheosis when a drunken Mailer gets down on all fours and goes head to head in a barking match with Torres's German shepherd.

Lasting about 90 minutes (hence the film's title, which Mailer also believed to be some kind of mob expression for "the shit has hit the fan"), the film plays out like a Norman Mailer home movie in its final moments when actress Beverly Bentley, his wife at the time, enters the scene and the entire cast turns to the camera for a final salutation. In his turn to filmmaking, Mailer supposed that his literary fame would garner him an audience beyond that of other independent directors. He proceeded to set up a production company, Supreme Mix, Inc., in New York (the name an homage to Herman Teppis's company in *The Deer Park*, Supreme Pix) and hired Farbar, who tried in vain to distribute *Wild 90*. Opening at the New Cinema Playhouse in early 1968, *Wild 90* would quickly disappear with little notice. Deeply flawed by the poor rendering of its soundtrack, the film was a nearly inaudible mess, but one that contained a multitude of possibilities for Mailer and laid the foundation for the films to follow.

Greatly influenced by the time he spent at the Actors Studio in the 1950s, Mailer's approach to cinema was that of a psychodramatist using improvisation to bring to the screen the interior reality of his characters. In his treatise "A Course in Film-making" in 1971, which appeared in *The New American Review*, Mailer writes:

We look at film, any film, and chaos is to a degree ordered. We know we are looking at life that is not quite life although it will certainly shift the way we live. So improvisation also orders chaos—gives it focus to random emotions—also becomes a life which is not quite life, and yet, even more than film, improvisation suggests it is indeed ready to become life. Ready to become life? Are we speaking of the moment when a fantasy, which is to say a psychological reality in the mind, transcends itself and becomes a fact?

Undaunted by the failure of *Wild 90*, Mailer set about making a second feature, one that hinged on a single dramatic premise—that within all of us is the potential to be either cop or crook. *Beyond the Law* (1968) takes place over one evening in a downtown New York police precinct where a sadistic Irish police chief (Mailer) plays Grand Inquisitor to that night's catch of petty crooks, axe murderers, pedophiles, hookers, and bikers on acid (as portrayed by Rip Torn and poet Michael McClure). Brilliantly conceived and acted by a group of mostly nonprofessionals, *Beyond the Law* plays out Mailer's complex moral Dostoyevskian cosmology, where the criminals come off as something close to saintly and the law couldn't be more sadistic, cruel, and unforgiving. The film had its premiere at the 1968 New York Film Festival. In the program notes, festival director Amos Vogel wrote that the film, "permeated with implied and explicit violence, poses the paradox of using cinéma vérité methods to tell a completely fabricated story which, in turn, re-emerges as social truth."

The film found a distributor with Barney Rossett's Grove Press Films, but its lukewarm reception at the NYFF had Mailer rethinking the film's ending. A second, virtually unseen edit exists—titled *Beyond the Law-Blue* (1970)—where the obscene and unequal combat of cops and crooks is pushed further into a pornographic and violent territory. Emulating the *I Am Curious* movies, a cause *celebre* for Grove Press at the time, *Beyond the Law-Blue* traces the extramarital affairs of the film's police chief protagonist, whose thinly veiled sadism leads to the eventual murder of one of his mistresses.

The editing of *Beyond the Law* coincided with the writing of Mailer's Pulitzer Prize-winning non-fiction novel *The Armies of the Night*; in his short treatise on writing, *The Spooky Art* in 2003, Mailer would describe how the making of his underground features had a good deal to do with his decision to treat himself as a third-person protagonist in *The Armies of the Night*:

Since there had been way too much of me in the rushes, I had come to see myself as a piece of yard goods, about which one could ask "Where can I cut this?" The habit of looking at myself as if I were someone other than myself—a character ready to be described in the third person—had already been established. Parenthetically, I think it's also a way of getting your psychiatry on the cheap.

Mailer's third and most ambitious film was conceived in June 1968 when assassination mania was at its peak in America. He embarked on *Maidstone* less than a week after the assassination of Robert F. Kennedy and the attempt on Andy Warhol's life by Valerie Solanas. To help finance the project, Mailer sold his share in *The Village Voice*. Entirely improvised and shot by Pennebaker, Ricky Leacock, and several smaller autonomous camera crews, *Maidstone* concerns the exploits of Norman T. Kingsley, a highly popular yet esoteric film director. Casting a remake of Bunuel's *Belle de Jour* (1967), Kingsley is also considering running for the U.S. presidency and finds himself being scrutinized by both the Eastern establishment and an elite secret police organization ostensibly on hand to protect him.

Described by Mailer as "a guerrilla raid on the nature of reality," *Maidstone* (shot in and around the East Hampton estates of Barney Rossett and Alfonso Ossorio) sets the stage for an explosion of human passion in its volatile mix of existential politics, direct cinema, and sexual intrigue that gradually erode that line between fiction and actuality. Surrounded by a close-knit group of friends and advisors collectively known as The Cashbox (including Rip Torn as Kingsley's half-brother Ray), Kingsley plays Mad Hatter to the Rabelaisian activities around him—one minute grilling a group of starlets eager to be in his film, the next donning boxing gloves and mouth guard for a sparring match before a debate with a group of black radicals that Kingsley hopes to make part of his constituency. Composed of 12 distinct tableaux, each separated by a title card ("A Meeting of High Officials," "Politicking in the Grass," "The Silences of the Afternoon," etc.), the film rapidly cuts between Kingsley holding court and the secret chambers of power where, in a vertigo of shifting allegiances and loyalties, members of the secret police and The Cashbox discuss whether it's best to protect Kingsley or to knock him off.

Pushing his ragtag group of players to their physical and psychic limits (future *Fantasy Island* (1977–84) star Herve Villechaize nearly drank himself to death in the course of the shoot, almost drowning in the Rossett pool even, Mailer would break the jaw of actor Lane Smith during one of several drunken altercations), Kingsley taunts, come-ons, and provocations were Mailer's attempt to foment an atmosphere of such kinetic and hallucinatory violence that one of his actors might actually try to take his life during the climactic scene at "The Grand Assassination Ball" where Kingsley is to announce his candidacy. A crueler take on Jean Rouch's 1961 psychodrama *The Human Pyramid*, *Maidstone* ends in dramatic, cathartic, and unexpected violence when Rip Torn attacks Mailer with a hammer and a bloody brawl ensues in which Mailer bites off part of Torn's ear. Grotesque and truly horrifying, the film's conclusion pushes direct cinema to its moral limits, laying bare the ambiguities between documentary fact and fiction, and clearly evoking the subterranean violence consuming America in the late-1960s. It also gave Mailer a trifecta of box-office bombs.

After taking three years to edit, *Maidstone* ran for two weeks and broke all house records at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1971. Encouraged by the response, Mailer booked the film

into a midtown Manhattan venue where it would do the theater's worst business ever. *Maidstone*, like Mailer's two earlier efforts, quickly faded from view, but not before wiping him out financially. "I would have done as well to have bought a yacht, taken it out to harbor and sunk it," Mailer said of the film.

An adaptation of his 1967 novel *Why Are We in Vietnam?* would've got underway in 1970. To be directed by Dick Fountaine, who had shot the interrogation sequence alongside Pennebaker in Mailer's *Beyond the Law*, but who had also captured Mailer's storm on the Pentagon in his documentary *Will The Real Norman Mailer Please Stand Up?* (1968); from a screenplay by Terry Southern and starring Sterling Hayden and Jim Morrison, the film came to an abrupt hail after the Doors lead singer met his muse in a bathtub in Paris. Mailer would briefly reprise his role as an Irish police chief in Milos Foreman's *Ragtime* (1981) and also write the screenplay for Lawrence Schiller's acclaimed TV miniseries *The Executioner's Song* (1982) starring Tommy Lee Jones as death-row inmate Gary Gilmore, before the opportunity to direct another featured presented itself.

The genesis of *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987), Mailer's first (and last) big budget Hollywood film, initially lies in a meeting between Cannon Films producer Menahem Golan and Jean-Luc Godard at the 1985 Cannes Film Festival. Golan and his cousin/partner Yoram Globus were riding high with a slate of moneymaking action films like *Delta Force* (1985) and *Missing in Action* (1984). During the meeting, a contract was drafted on a napkin that would see Godard directing a version of *King Lear*, written and starring Mailer, alongside his daughter Kate, as Cordelia in a scenario that envisioned Lear as a mafia kingpin named Don Learo. The Mailers only worked with Godard for a day in Geneva before returning home amidst rumors that the author and director had had a falling out over the direction in which Godard wanted to take the film—in particular, the insinuation of an incestuous relationship between Lear and Cordelia. Godard finished the film with Burgess Meredith and Molly Ringwald, while Mailer worked out a separate deal with Golan and Globus to bring his 1984 novel *Tough Guy's Don't Dance* to the screen.

Shot in and around Mailer's favorite haunts in Provincetown, his home for over 50 years, *Tough Guys Don't Dance* is an offbeat noir starring Ryan O'Neal as a tragically unsuccessful writer addicted to booze and moneyed woman. A drunken one-night stand ends in horror when he discovers a pool of blood in his car (and a severed head in his marijuana stash) compelling him to piece together the events of the night before to solve a murder that he may or may not have committed. The film plays out like a soap opera on acid set in the "wild, wild West of East," with Mailer's surreal dialogue and Angelo Badalamenti's haunting score in a way prefiguring David Lynch's *Twin Peaks* (1990–91). A far cry from his earlier films, *Tough Guys Don't Dance* is deliberately scripted and staged with O'Neal's fantastically hungover, dread-filled performance—a dim beacon within the film's barely discernible an absurdly labyrinthine plot.

"Making films was the only time in my life where I felt like Marco Polo," Mailer said in an interview in the twilight of his years.

I had this huge energy, this huge enthusiasm, and the necessary craziness to make them. I must say, once I started making movies, with the exception of the more exciting years of one's personal life, it was the most exciting stuff I ever did. It's the nearest I ever came to being a general, which I always wanted to be. This was a way of becoming a general without having to go through West Point and the endless years of crap you got to take, the iron character you need, the stupidity that you have to accumulate and the bravery you have to develop if you don't have it already. Immediately, as a film director, you are a general. And the best part of it is—there is very little blood.

Michael Chaiken is a film curator and archivist. He has organized retrospectives dedicated to the life and work of Albert and David Maysles, Amos Vogel and Norman Mailer. A regular contributor to *Film Comment*, he has worked as an archivist for The Estate of Nicholas Ray, D.A. Pennebaker, Norman Mailer and Bob Dylan.



Figure 1.1 “I’m an eye. A mechanical eye. I, the machine, show you a world the way only I can see it.” Dziga Vertov, 1923. Mailer operates one of several cameras during the shooting of his third 1960s film, *Maidstone*. Outtake scene from *Maidstone* (1970). Frame enlargement from 16mm triacetate projection print. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

1

INTRODUCTION: MAILER'S FILM AESTHETICS

Justin Bozung

Norman Mailer's approach to cinema was both quixotic and cubist. Because of how, in delving into cinema, the two-time Pulitzer Prize-winning author was not only using movie-making as a paint brush in which he could draw yet another intersecting line toward a creation of a Picasso-like style; he took to films to illuminate our concept of reality, aesthetics and form, and he approached the cinema as an engineer who was trying to create a new artistry out of a patina within an existing form.

In a post-Cassavetes lexicon, Norman Mailer's cinema was bound upon the idea of putting: "non-actors" or "untried actors," even creatures of Warholian mystique in front of a camera to improvise out scenarios with existential, unknowable outcomes; forcing a distortion and blurring of reality and fiction during the filming process. The desired result? Norman Mailer wanted to find a "subjective reality," or a psychological one. Mailer was trying to capture a kind of *Naked Lunch* reality. Which was what Jack Kerouac once suggested to William S. Burroughs as that: "frozen moment when everyone sees what is on the end of every fork."¹

This would be a subjective reality where one might have a clear vision of what was under the surface. Mailer's goal was to create sources of tension, mood, so that one could comprehend chaos objectively in the very instant it was occurring in situations inside of time because these moments were the quintessence of reality. Of course, this result wouldn't be available to all, including an audience watching Mailer's cinema, or could it be?

Mailer figured that he had to cast non-actors in his films, because if he had cast, for example, an "unpaid actor who is therefore invariably an amateur," the result would be not so much a film but a capturing of self-consciousness. Films captured people. They, in turn, became subjects or objects; still, the amateur would be affected by Heisenberg's Principle of Uncertainty, which, in context, observed an effect that the presence of the camera had upon its subject, skewing the real, or the personality of the subject, causing them not to be themselves. The non-actor, most certainly, could also fall victim to this notion as well, but then again, they could only be themselves, he felt. In front of the camera they had no script to work from. If the non-actor fell prey to camera influence, it might not be of any major consequence because through improvisation they'd be playing themselves playing someone else effectively. Mailer stumbled into his way of approaching movies through the exploration of his existential philosophy during the 1960s. "Film should tell us something about life," he suggested at the end of the 1960s. His desire to make films came out of his direct opposition to the conventional or traditional method of movie-making. Mailer's cinema was a response to how Hollywood films did not satisfy his existential concerns which are sprinkled

in many of his 1960s texts like *An American Dream* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?*. His existential philosophy, while pulsing through the circuits of his fiction, is best seen, however, in a reading of his two film essays: “Some Dirt in the Talk” and “A Course on Film-making,” which are interpreted here but also included in this volume following this introduction (Chapters 2 and 10, respectively).

The pivot within his existential ideology of exploring Being was on the premise that the nature of acting and the actor was not just rooted in make believe, but that it was a metaphysical and existential business as well. He insisted on such because “there is hardly a guy alive who is not an actor to the hilt.” Mailer’s suggestion was that we’re all actors in our daily lives. While this observation is seemingly in opposition to Jean-Paul Sartre’s existential idea of “bad faith,” which suggests that man’s existence as a “character, individual, or person who defines himself through the social categorization of his formal identity,”² is a negation of Being—here, Mailer crafts an amendment to Sartre rather than a departure. Man is an actor in his everyday life because of how each of us acts on a daily basis to influence social situations. We go about day-after-day manipulating others around us to get what we want. While this is one side of his existential coin, the other had to deal with the position in which the actor was residing. For Mailer, the existential situation could also be defined as, “something important and/or unfamiliar,” when we are involved in it, or when it is “taking place,” and we “do not know how it is going to turn out.” In other words, true bouts that required courage resulted in the puritanical pursuit of Being itself. A boxer was in an existential situation when he stepped into the ring, for example. When a boxer crosses under the ropes, if there is any worry in his head, he is then reinstating Being-in-itself out of his own dread and anxiety as he is feeling it within. These are the two building blocks that craft the foundation for Mailer’s brand of American Existentialism.

Acting was, for Mailer, like one’s journey through life, existential by nature. Actors, like civilians, must live in “existential situations like love, sex, disaster, and death, all those ultimates whose end are by their nature indeterminable.” The actor is existential too, because of how they had to endure the tension in an opening night, but also experience the uncertainty one must live with in regards to the possibility of future work coming their way. “Actors walk through life uncertain if they are a god, fool, hero, or clown, or eventually some new species of man,” Mailer wrote in “Some Dirt in the Talk” documenting the making of his first film *Wild 90* (1968).

The existential actor tied into Mailer’s ideas on the aesthetic mysteries of cinema. “Film is a phenomenon whose resemblance to death has long been ignored,” Mailer suggested. Where does the audience “go” when a film begins? They sit in a chair in the dark—but where *does* the mind go?

Aesthetically, it seemingly was like death for Mailer. As when a film starts an audience is transported into another world, and the movie star guides an audience through a netherworld while a story unfolds. Some of these ideas for Mailer may have come out of his interest in the avant-garde cinema. Mailer was infatuated by the avant-garde and underground film genre. He was an admirer, early on, of the work of Jean Cocteau, Kenneth Anger, Stan Brakhage, Shirley Clarke, Andy Warhol, and Ron Rice. Later on, he was bitten by the films of Ingmar Bergman, Fellini, Antonioni, and Jean-Luc Godard. Growing up like most American boys in the 1930s and 1940s, he took in frequent showings of Hollywood films. One of his favorite films as an adolescent was Michael Curtiz’s *Captain Blood* (1935).³ He was also particularity taken with Humphrey Bogart, so much so that over the years, in conversation, Mailer would tell anyone close to him that “Bogie” was like an uncle.⁴ But it was the cinema of Godard and Warhol that showed him the infinite possibilities of the medium as a means to explore philosophy, dreams, memory, reality—these film-makers ballooned his phenomenology as well.

The mysteries lay to Mailer, not just in film’s oneiric possibilities, but also in the equation that film relegated itself to memory through the infinite possibilities of montage.

Film exists as a set of images in one's memory which are not too different, as years go by, from the images we keep of a relative who is dead. Film is part memory. We remember in films as if they had taken place and we were there. . . . Think of your favorite uncle who is gone. Does the apparatus of the mind which flashes his picture before we act in another fashion if we ask for a flash of Humphrey Bogart next?

Mailer's understanding of montage pushed his film philosophy even further after he began making films, he would develop quixotic ideas on editing with his films *Maidstone* (1970) and later, *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987). "When you edit a film—images/scenes can be interchangeable (regardless of plot). Film creates a psychic state of memory, and dream. A Deja Vu. A Death Mask, in a blink of eye or jump of never. You can do anything in film."

Where most who might be familiar with Mailer's films may recognize that his first feature film, *Wild 90* was released in 1968, his first, actual foray into film-making, however, came over twenty years prior in 1947, when, as a young man, Mailer, who was on the verge of becoming the best-selling author of *The Naked and the Dead*, made his first film—a short ten-minute single reeler that went dubiously untitled, and featured his immediate family, his parents Barney and Fanny, his younger sister Barbara, and his first wife, Beatrice Silverman. Mailer cast his cousin, the beautiful Millicent Brower, as a young woman who, on discovering that she is pregnant begins to have nightmares and visions out of the fear of telling her family about her predicament. (Somewhat existential, at least, in terms of Mailer's philosophy as it would be developed later.) The film was later dubbed, *Millicent's Dream*, by Mailer film archivist Michael Chaiken when the movie was discovered just after Mailer's death in the archive of film-maker and Mailer friend D.A. Pennebaker in 2007. The film was restored by Martin Scorsese's Film Foundation and is available to view exclusively today at the Harvard Film Archive in Boston or The Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin.

Where Mailer's 1947 film shows the promise of a burgeoning film-maker with a keen eye for aesthetics, it also suggests the work of a young artist that is overwhelmed by his influences. As *Untitled* is a work in the vein of the trance films of Maya Deren, it is even steeped, on some very minor level, in the early psychodramas of Stan Brakhage as well. With its use of various dream symbols to showcase Millicent's urgency, Mailer laced his first film with a bit of surrealism à la Jean Cocteau's *Blood of A Poet* (1935)—a film he was very smitten with after having seen it with his younger sister not long after it made its way to the United States.⁵ To hold Mailer's *Untitled* up and compare it to any of the works of these other film-makers would be to have Mailer comment against it, most likely. As for him:

Categories are just like critics' attempts to bring order to a complex aesthetic universe. I have always resisted that because I feel it's up to the working artist or craftsman to create their own order. If they pay too much attention to categories, that can really get in the way. You see that happening to young movie-makers all the time. They confuse their own opportunity to create order with an order created generations before and sacrifice creation for homage.⁶

Mailer's belief in an oneiric or memory-based cinema wasn't his alone. Many film-makers before his time, but also those who made films as his peers also reveled in this same aesthetic mantra. As an example, both Stanley Kubrick and Ingmar Bergman saw cinema in a similar light. "To me, all film is a dream,"⁷ Kubrick suggested in the early 1970s to British film critic Alexander Walker. Bergman too suggested: "Film as dream, film as music. No art passes our conscience in the way film does, or goes directly to our feelings, deep down in the dark room of our souls."⁸ Mailer's cinema

philosophy phenomenologically explored the mysteries and cult of the movie star. The mysteries of cinema, at times were something that he himself could not even fathom, “I cannot even begin to articulate it . . .,” Mailer told a hostile British crowd in opposition of his aesthetics in the wake of an early festival screening of his film *Maidstone* in 1970. “We are obviously dealing with a phenomenon whose roots are less defined than the power and glory of a king and church. Yes, movies are more mysterious.”

Mailer developed his ideas on film early, and his grasp of the aesthetics of cinema gave way to his mastery of analogy in his written works. The cinema, arguably, became his most-appropriated analogy in all of his writing over the years. Cinema analogies are strung all throughout his vast fifty years as an author; from equating John F. Kennedy to a movie star in “Superman Comes to the Supermarket” in 1960, to describing Muhammad Ali as having the charm of a “movie star,” in the early 1970s,⁹ Mailer immortalized the characters or personas he wrote about by giving them a bewitching, cinematic immortality on the page. He was fascinated and wrote about movie stars like Marilyn Monroe and Clint Eastwood. He even, at times, would suggest that his explorations into new forms past the novel could be best understood as being analogous to the cinema. His painterly, dripping poetry volume, 1962’s *Deaths for the Ladies*, was “a movie with words,”¹⁰ Mailer wrote in an essay in the 1970s. *The Deer Park: A Play*, “has quick changes like scenes in a film . . .”¹¹ El Loco, the hero of Mailer’s mid-1960s short story on bullfighting named after its protagonist, “looked like a cross between Ray Bolger and Charlie Chaplin.”¹² These are but a few examples



Figure 1.2 Mailer family cousin Millicent Brower stars in Mailer’s first film, 1947’s *Untitled* aka *Millicent’s Dream*. The film was shot and edited by Mailer himself. Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

amidst hundreds of others available to readers across Mailer's vast body of texts. A corollary here suggests that Norman Mailer had more than just a passing interest in the cinema. While his desire to make films came out of his existential philosophy in an era when the avant-garde and experimental film were on the cusp of being examined under tremendous intellectualism, seemingly, films were, very much, flickering through Norman Mailer's blood.

Even when Mailer wasn't making films, he was often planning or at least thinking about a movie concept to coincide with his writing. Past the making of *Maidstone* he had even tried to get a film off the ground about the Kennedy assassination with a potential screenplay by his long-time friend Jean Malaquais.¹³ He wrote lengthy film essays for magazines on films like *Last Tango in Paris* (1972) and Oliver Stone's *JFK* (1991), and there were film treatments and scripts like his massive screenplay adaptation of Henry Miller's *The Rosy Crucifixion* which never saw the screen.

Being friends with a Hollywood film-maker like Peter Bogdanovich, Mailer maintained a persistency in his desire to get Bogdanovich to bring J.K. Huysman's *La-Bas* to the silver screen¹⁴ or even adapt his *An American Dream* with Cybill Shepherd in the role of Cherry.¹⁵ His interest in *La-Bas* was so prevalent that he even wrote a film treatment for the French novel for *Playboy* magazine in the 1970s. Director Sergio Leone hired Mailer at the tail end of the 1970s to adapt novelist Harry Grey's *The Hoods* into a film. Having written a couple of drafts for Leone in Italy, the Spaghetti Western film-maker opted for other directions for what would eventually become his final opus *Once Upon A Time in America* (1984). Mailer eventually had to sue the Italian film-maker to be paid for his work on the screenplay after the two parted company. Mailer's film collaboration with photographer and film-maker Lawrence Schiller would prove to be his most fruitful, however. Cinematically, the two collaborated on the television film adaptation of Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (1982) but also on several other film and television projects over the years. A job even came to Mailer serving as a technical consultant on Ron Howard's *Cinderella Man* (2005) near the end of his life, and up until his final days he was working with friend and actor Stephan Morrow (whom he had first met when he cast Morrow in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*) on the realization of his *The Deer Park* into a film; which would've seen his long-term obsession with his novel on Hollywood being filmed on a theater stage.¹⁶ To Mailer, movies were a kind of aesthetic church. "I've been saying this over and over. Movies are quasi-religious ceremonies," he suggested in the mid-1960s. They "call all the elements of the occult, the mystical, and the everyday. We've always felt we understood the movies because they were comfortable. They told simple stories, they had pretty people in them. They were pleasurable. We could escape our lives in them."

In the 1960s, Mailer saw a lack of reality present in much of film, and for one steeped in America's existential crisis, this was a point of interest. Part of his existential vector was to criticize most of the cinema, including not just Hollywood films of the era, but the *vérité* documentary and avant-garde genres—these that were perhaps the closest to him. He suggested that no films managed to portray an actual reality, because, as he told journalist John Whiting in 1970: "There is no such thing as a firm notion of reality, as one looks at it."

The writer had opposition toward Hollywood films. The Hollywood film was plastic; it was a filmed theater that did not portray a reality nor did it explore the existential concern that had been brewing through the undercurrent of much of Mailer's writing. He had been observing, phenomenologically speaking, violence, Being, authentic experience, Nothingness, since the mid-1950s, as seen in his landmark essay "The White Negro." There was a fakeness to much of Hollywood's product that he could not stomach.

Mailer even suggested that the narrative structuring within all Hollywood films was a pure existential negation: because of how the cinema was a collaborative medium, it therefore killed the

notion of a singular authentic authorship. "Interpretation had to collide," Mailer wrote in the 1960s. The Hollywood film story, which most of the time had its origins with either a book or a stage play, would then go from a concept to something that was volleyed around from a director, who would have his own interpretation of it, to a producer who would see his own vision of it, and then it would run through the minds of the actors and the crew—all giving "The coherence of the original material," a feeling of being "scattered ashes." Hollywood films were a filmed theater that did not "dramatize the dangers of the day." Mailer took this notion a step further when he went on to suggest: "There was film and filmed theater, there were relatively pure movies, and there were money-making motion pictures which had almost nothing to do with movies or memory or dream, but were filmed circuses for suckers . . .," these were consumers "who ate at the cafeteria of American Aesthetic where the media meals were served up as binder for the shattered nervous system of the masses."

His ideas on the fakeness of Hollywood came to him through his ever-growing concerns that Being was in trouble in the mid-1960s. The United States had gone into the tube. Culturally, where we had once been beset on existence, essence, and experience via the stories of writers like Ernest Hemingway, the US was now, according to Mailer, ripping through all the gears and driving head on straight at the abyss. Man was pushing into Nothingness. This was through the interruptions brought on by television commercials, our over-dependence on antibiotics, and through our growing use of plastics. This was the fuel that stoked Mailer's existential fire of the era. Americans were ceasing to be, to live, to think, to feel, through our experiencing of the negation of forms. The texture of everything was diminishing—and no less, between our very fingertips! This resulted in a kind of existential crisis, which was at the center of his storm of writing in the era. Not just from Mailer's observations about plastic and antibiotics, but also through a conspiracy that was seemingly contending to further destroy the authenticity in form by reducing the aesthetic appearance and phenomenological response one had to buildings all around above. There was dead architecture going up at an alarming rate. Schools were being designed to resemble factories and prisons and vice versa.

Mailer's desire to reinstate Being as well as capture an existential reality was achieved, partially, in the shooting of his first film, *Wild 90*—although he did not intentionally set out to do such with the conception of the movie in the first place. He only stumbled upon his new way of making films and ability for existential treatise in the aftermath of its shooting while he was steeped in the editing process.

Reinstating Being: *Wild 90* and *Beyond the Law*

Wild 90 started out as an experiment that the author and his two friends undertook out of improvisation. The film came out of some late night drinking sessions that the three (Mailer, Knox, and Farbar) partook in each night following performances of Mailer's 1950s passion project, *The Deer Park*, his novel-turned-play at the Theater de Lys in 1967. The film came out of classical Sartrean boredom and spontaneity. Out of Mailer's supervision of *The Deer Park* came the seeds for his cinema: *Wild 90* is over-wrought with fleshy, aesthetic theatricality. The characters in Mailer's first feature come and go as they please as if it were living on a stage, and while the scenario for *Beyond the Law* proved to be more refined, it too exudes a heavy theater aura. *Wild 90*, however, proved that Mailer and friends, in their experiment, which was designed most likely to be nothing more than a way to kill nightly repetition and boredom, turned into a boyhood fantasy realized to make movies. But it also gave them a lush excuse, as well as a theater to carry on with their indulgence in drink. The idea would find Mailer and company interpreting Italian Mafioso, which, in

the end, turned into something else. "We were more serious then we knew," Mailer wrote in "Some Dirt in the Talk." Through improvisational performance, Mailer saw the film "take on that intricacy of detail and personality which was usually reserved for the novel." The film had "something to do with the way people act in life."

Out of Hollywood film's inability to capture reality, albeit a psychological or subjective and existential one, Mailer fashioned his cinema as an "orgy"—where two worlds of sentience "come together." In *Wild 90*, "a theatrical revue," he took his ideas on the nature of acting and combined them with the existentialism of the theater, which, as the situation would prevail, he was working in at the same time that he happened to make his first film. After all, the stage actor was the most existential of all actors to The Author. The Hollywood film actor wasn't necessarily always to be deemed as existential, especially when he was working with a script, because the situation could not then be existential when one already knew the outcome of a situation. Actors in Hollywood films worked with directors and crews and they worked from a script and all of them collaborated on the making of a film together. It could not be existential because everyone had read the script and knew how the situation of the character that they were bringing to life was going to end. The actor was most existential in the theater according to Mailer. "The theater is a feast and a fuck," he wrote, "theater works on our ideas of social life and our understanding of manners."

For *Wild 90*, Mailer drew upon his notion that the existential nature of the actor played the best in the theater, and was more effective there than in any film, at least, that had been made up until the fall of 1967. "Film, after all, is fed, not only by literature but by the theater." The theater imitated life in a living place, in front of an audience, and it had real people as its imitators. So why not combine the dream and memory of the cinema with the reality that the theater could evoke? "Can it be said that something works in the theater of which only pretends to work in the film," Mailer wrote, "On stage, the actor is in communication with the audience." The director of a movie works with the player, yet the actor of Hollywood films is not existential, nor does their work portray a reality of Being in that the director may also cut the player's lines in editing. He can re-write their dialogue, even cut out a flub the actor may make on set, and even re-shoot a scene several times over, whereas, in existential opposition, the actor of the stage does not live with that luxury. There are no second takes in front of a live audience. If they did such it would break the reality of mood, or the tension that exists in the theater between the actor and his audience.

Mailer was not a stranger to the theater. In the 1940s, while a student at Harvard, he apprenticed at a theater near campus. It would inspire him to write a play in 1942, *The Naked and the Dead*, a work that preceded his own 1948 Second World War novel of the same name. Mailer's play was inspired by his time as an employee spent behind the walls of a mental institution.¹⁷ However, this would not be the last time that the theatrical would float up to the surface in his artistic canon. As Mailer writes in *Cannibals & Christians*: "the first work in an artist is the shaping of his own personality."¹⁸ Elements of the theater proliferate Mailer's entire oeuvre, and here it suggests a richer and complex aestheticism that strikes of purgatory and the oneiric. *Barbary Shore*, Mailer's 1950s sophomore novel, was a critical flop, yet work like *The Deer Park* that features a minimalist stage-bound setting and heavy dialogue exchanges between a handful of characters stuck in a void—are both works that could lend themselves to the theater, *The Deer Park* realized and welcomed with critical responses. *Barbary Shore* was aimed at the curtain as well. Attempted by Mailer friend and late-period Absurdist Jack Gelber, the writer of the stage play *The Connection*, Gelber would try for twenty years on and off to get Mailer's novel onto the stage.

The time in which Mailer started making films could be considered his Absurdist Period (1965–68), as he not only intertwined the theater with cinema but also deployed abstract devices

as a means to issue statements about Being. Works like *Why Are We in Vietnam?* and *The Deer Park: A Play* have a Beckettian flare in Mailer's devaluation of language, exploration of form, and an aesthetic minimalism that is spiced with cinematic qualities. Theater was seemingly on Mailer's mind at this time. In *Cannibals & Christians*, two of Mailer's monodramas—one-act works—"The Political Economy of Time," and "The Metaphysics of the Belly," serve the author as "self-interviews" but more so read like interrogations on existentialism and metaphysical philosophy on a stage set with two actors. These two plays also serve Mailer's constituent parts of ego, emotional self, and his rational self—all in conflict with one another. Mailer once described one of these as: "a theatrical production presented by some company in oneself to some audience of oneself."¹⁹ While Mailer had been writing fiction since childhood, his interest in the theater and cinema closely followed behind when it came to his interests in aesthetics and form.

To consider Mailer's theatricality in his work is also to consider the visible theatricality which runs amok in his public persona as well, as he seemed to live a life dramatically steeped in Shakespeare's *Theatrum Mundi*, while in pursuit of his authentic existential experience on the world's stage where people play in social roles as characters.²⁰ *Mundi* likens reality to a play, God to an author/director. The world is a set, and people are its actors. Mailer's "on stage antics" were amplified by his unabashed swagger, and drunken, cheeky ribald—which could have just as well made Norman Mailer a reject character on a stage out of a Tennessee Williams play or in a novel who was, not from Brooklyn Heights, but more so from Texas or Ireland. Mailer performed in *Mundi*, when he took the lead role on October 20, 1967 as he stormed the Pentagon as a one man army hell-bent on putting an end to the war in Vietnam as the world watched. Could Norman Mailer have done anything *more* theatrical?

The characters in all of Mailer's cinema also seemingly live by the *Mundi* principals. *Maidstone*, named after a section of Long Island where the film was shot, echoes back to Shakespeare. Mailer's cast present "a happening" in their disoriented stasis via their performing for each other in a *Mundi* fashion in the film with several cameras upon them. In over-running a series of wealthy estates in Mailer's film, he seemingly wanted his audience to be reminded of Shakespeare's own invasion of Maidstone in Kent, England in 1588; where The Bard and James Burbage took over a tiny village, built a stage, and hosted their plays-in-progress for themselves and a few unsuspecting locals.²¹

In *Wild 90*, where Mailer had first thought, perhaps, that he and his fellows were merely crafting something befitting an aesthetic entry into Sontag's Camp, in the end it became, at least to him, "The first existential movie," because of how the film highlighted, "Hollywood, acting, existentialism—no less—the logic of the real disease of the film."

It was out of *Wild 90* that Mailer discovered his concept of putting the untried actor in front of the camera. Mickey Knox had had previous acting experience, but Buzz Farbar? He was new to the camera, as were most of his secondary players. Mailer had been "acting all his life," as he suggested to journalist Joseph Gelmis in 1970 when discussing his film work retrospectively. For Mailer to go in front of the camera as Prince in the film must have seemingly been as natural to the writer as a walk on any Sunday morning. Disenchanted with the inability of the camera to capture a subjective reality because of how it psychologically skewed it most of the time, Mailer crafted the working order in which he could then capture what he was after. Where his first two films of the 1960s were more aimed at reinstating Being, his last two films, *Maidstone* and *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, are where, finally, he manages to achieve his desired attack on reality while recapitulating the aesthetics of form.



Figure 1.3 Mailer stars as Prince in his first feature-length film, *Wild 90* (1968). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

Exploring Mailer's approach in *Wild 90*, my essay "Visualizing Being and Nothingness: Mailer Meets *Godot*," (Chapter 3 this volume) looks at how Mailer combined the theater with the cinema in his first film. *Wild 90* is an absurdist *soirée* that contends to present a study of Being out of the presentation of Nothingness. To call *Wild 90* a film of the absurd is to connect the film to The Theater of the Absurd but also to draw comparisons to the Theater's most celebrated work, Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Mailer's film panders several of the same philosophical appropriations of Beckett's work, at least, those observed through the melange of interpretations of *Godot* offered by scholars and long-time critics of Beckett's *mise en scène*. Here also, I broadly deploy the existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre as a method to show how both Beckett and Mailer crafted theatrical works centered around existential ideology, but also, to show how like any philosopher before them, each borrowed from previous existential godheads to craft their ontological systems. Both Beckett and Mailer abstract the traditional form and through that attention they display a visual Nothingness in the physical world, which then allows for Being to spring outward from within.

Going deeper into the recesses of Being, looking at Mailer as a character who is exploring his own self-image in *Wild 90*, Maggie McKinley points out in her "Mailer Interrogates Machismo: Self-Reflexive Commentary in *Wild 90* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?*" (Chapter 4 this volume) how Mailer's film acts as an opportunity to Mailer for self-examination in opposition of how he is perceived critically. Through the abstract form in both *Wild 90* and *Vietnam?*, Mailer against

critical perception is not “endorsing a kind of arrogant machismo” in either of these works, but instead, is taking a closer look at machismo in so that he can offer “criticisms of hyper-masculinity,” which “defy rather” than satisfy the “widespread expectations” of his critics. Mailer is aware of how his public, as well as critics, see him through the characters in his work, but also judge him through past personal yet public exploits. As McKinley suggests, this is what leads Mailer to make films in the first place—he is challenging the “notorious character” that has been shaped by the public. McKinley examines the similarities in Mailer’s aesthetic approach in both *Wild 90* and *Vietnam?* in order to compare Mailer’s pursuit of “performed identities” in both works. In *Wild 90*, as McKinley points out, Mailer was trying to “translate to the cinema the surreal, obscenely poetic, and allegorical comment on performed identity that he had accomplished in literature” prior.

Where *Wild 90* lit the fuse so that Mailer could have a new outlet in which to explore the nature of existential being; his follow-up, *Beyond the Law* (1968), shot before his first film was even released, finds his combination of film and theater taken to a darker, metaphysical realm. Out of all of Mailer’s cinema, *Beyond the Law* is his most accessible cinema work, yet it is as aesthetically dense as *Wild 90* with its theatrical intent and tension. Abstracting, once again, traditional Hollywood methods of making movies, *Beyond the Law* is a “radical departure from the aborted gangster-movie melodrama of his first film,” writes Kenneth Jurkiewicz.

In Jurkiewicz’s “Transcending the Formula: *Beyond the Law* and the Old-Fashioned Cop Movie” (Chapter 5 this volume) he notes how Mailer explores the relationship between cop and criminal. In Mailer’s second movie, he uses, once again, a combination of non-actors and actors, but also subjects them to an intricate and existential scenario. Mailer boils the classic Hollywood cop film of the 1940s and 1950s, and as Jurkiewicz likens, “successfully infuses new life into a bunch of tired and overly familiar police-movie stereotypes; the garrulous and obsessive Irish police detective, his patient and long-suffering wife, the seedy and tainted vice-dumb-broad prostitutes, and the usual grimy assortment of crooks, bums, weirdos, and crazies who had inhaled the dingy backroom of big city precincts in countless grade-B detective movies.” Mailer’s character Pope in *Beyond the Law* but also in *Beyond the Law-Blue* (1970) is a representation of the writer’s views on American duality. Except here in opposition to the character Mailer portrays in *Wild 90* (Prince), a tough guy thug, his second film intensifies his approach to the saint and the psychopath, a variation on Dostoevskian archetype, by representing themes and existential concerns that are also visible in the dichotomy of his anti-heroes in his texts like Rojack in *An American Dream* and Gary Gilmore in *The Executioner’s Song*.

Where Mailer examines the existential nature of the cop and the criminal through a Dostoevskian framework, in “All of Us Are Policemen, All of Us Are Criminals: Discovering Dostoevsky in a Re-Evaluation of *Beyond the Law*,” Catriona McAvoy suggests how Mailer’s existential philosophy can be best understood through an examination of the metaphysical relationship that Mailer posits between the “saint and the psychopath.” As McAvoy points out, “Through his work, Norman Mailer explores Dostoevskian themes of criminality; good and evil, punishment and redemption and the duality of man.” In *Beyond the Law*, but also in his as-of-yet unreleased X-rated redux, *Beyond the Law-Blue*, Mailer explores “these ideas during a night of confrontational interrogations at a police station,” which “take these concepts further and shockingly show corruption at its most extreme.” McAvoy sees Dostoevsky’s influence upon Mailer through her examination of *Beyond the Law*’s collection of characters. She also notes how Mailer’s film is a antecedent to Abel Ferrara’s controversial 1990 film, *Bad Lieutenant*, which Mailer coincidentally admired, after having seen it on a trip to the United Kingdom with his then biographer Robert Lucid.²²

Capturing subjective reality: *Maidstone*

Where Mailer had created a kind of filmed theater with both *Wild 90* and *Beyond the Law* to reinstate Being, in *Maidstone* the writer took his hypothesis on the non-actor and the desire to capture a subjective reality on film to its utmost reach. This time around he made a straight shot toward his "attack on the nature of reality," by journeying into the heart of entropy. For Mailer, *Maidstone* was a film: "about the surface of reality and the less visible surface of psychological reality." The film was Mailer's attempt at distorting reality so that one could observe at the same time.

Just as he had done before, Mailer deployed a *cinéma vérité* style forcing his audience to watch a kind of schizophrenic cinematic cubism, courtesy of the lights in points-of-view and multiple perspectives which give the work a disorienting dreaminess. *Maidstone* is aesthetically drawn up as a cubist work, in how Mailer enlisted a team of cameramen (Pennebaker, Leacock, Proferes, Doob), who, direct cinema pioneers in their time, brought succinct shooting styles, investments in the actors, as well as a personal point-of-view to the filming. Mailer was freed up. "Directing" now meant that he would have to serve as a general leading an army into the heart of his existential scenario. (What could be more existential than attempting to explore the nature of reality via the improvisation scene?) Mailer had a premise for his film, but he didn't know how it would turn out. He would not only have to act the film's protagonist in the role of Norman T. Kingsley, but he would also now have to serve as the central antagonist of the piece too. He would need to swerve his cast into directions that were necessary to reach a heightened mood that would culminate in an assassination. Paul Austin, *Maidstone* Production Manager, casts a light on Mailer's devilish approach to distortion:

Norman had asked me to order him a lion's cage. So I found one and ordered it. It came on the evening that we were all there. It was about ten o'clock at night. It was really dark out. I went to Norman and said, "I've placed the lion cage for you. I want to know if you can come and take a look at it to tell me if it's in the right place for you." So we walked over, and we stood there for a moment looking at it. Norman said, "You know, Paul, I think that someone really might try to assassinate me . . ." I looked at him for a second, then I said, "Oh no. Norman, I don't think that will happen." He paused then he smiled at me with this little smirk and said, "Boy, that was a great scene, wasn't it?" I was surprised. I said, "Okay, well, let's get Pennebaker over here, and we can shoot it!" He responded with, "Oh, I can't do that again, I'm not an actor."²³

By giving his camera team directorial rights, and even his actors in *Maidstone*, he was untied so that he could devise the rifts in reality that he was attempting to capture on film. (Slightly ironic, when one considers, again, how Mailer felt about collaboration in Hollywood film-making and how it was existentially illegal.)

As a work of Cubism, Mailer like Picasso contended to analyze reality. His aim was to deconstruct it, and then reassemble it through multiple points-of-view so that the subject (reality) could, in effect, then become an object in which an audience could gaze at it, such as the final moments of the film when Mailer himself is attacked with a hammer at the hands of Rip Torn. Whereas Mailer had distorted the reality of his scenario for all of his participants through his warped senses and crass manipulations, by also allowing his guests to indulge in drugs and alcohol, his experiment yielded a subjective reality for all of his actors involved in the shooting.

When an audience watches *Maidstone* they are taken out of time via the film's juggled structural composition, which then asks for them to decipher what is real and what is not in the context of Norman Mailer himself. To an audience, Mailer is never not Norman Mailer. Regardless of whether he is Prince in *Wild 90*, Pope in *Beyond the Law*, or Kingsley in *Maidstone*, his self is echoed in the characters that he plays in his films. It is hard to decipher between Mailer the Being and Mailer the actor. So that when an audience experiences the final hammer scene in *Maidstone*, it proves disturbing as a kind of psychotic Zapruder film reverberation en masse.

Mailer creates a reality in the scene too, by turning his back on the film's audience, almost shutting them out as he confronts Torn in the final seconds of film: bickering with Torn, they exchange insults, and whereas Mailer had previously been open to the cameras documenting the proceedings, he turned his back to them, which then propagates an appearance of a kind of reality in its documentary look and feel. In this method, the film is just as much an exploration of cinema form as much as it is an attack on reality itself. Leo Braudy notes Mailer's inclusion of the hammer scene in the film because of how: "Torn's hammer on Mailer's head does not complete the plot of the film so much as it completes the aesthetic."²⁴ But was the fight between Torn and Mailer real or fake? Or was Mailer trying to trick his audience just as he had tricked his cast? Rip Torn gives a clue:

Norman must've told twenty or thirty people to set up a phoney assassination attempt, because the film was supposed to be about assassinations.²⁵ With a hammer I'd have control, and in fact, I went to Norman and showed him the hammer because I wanted him to know what I was going to do.²⁶

While Torn's recounting of the final scene in *Maidstone* suggests that Mailer knew something in advance about Torn's intentions to attack him in front of D.A. Pennebaker's camera on that final day of shooting, it also shows the lengths that Mailer would venture to attain his art. But does the scene present a reality? Pennebaker's camera manages to capture Mailer's subjective reality along with Torn's as they argue about the reasoning and motivation for the act itself in front of the camera. Where Mailer might have been privy to Torn's intentions before his attack, perhaps here then, the reason why audiences cannot turn away from the particular instance that the fight occurs is because they know that Norman Mailer was most likely not expecting it at that very moment in which it happened to him. This then resulted, on film, of the capturing of a subjective reality through the presentation of a scenario that was steeped in a conceptual framework of a non-reality.

Although Mailer wouldn't make another film for twenty years, his desire to explore reality in cinema never wavered. Trying again, but this time leaving *cinéma vérité* behind for pulp fiction, Mailer made another attempt at capturing a true psychological and subjective reality in his last film *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. Tim Madden, the film's spaced-out, existential anti-hero finds a psychological reality or that *Naked Lunch* moment in the film's now lampooned and much maligned "Oh God, Oh man" sequence. Seeming like a cinematic non-sequitur, Madden receives a letter from a former flame, and in a moment during his reading of a few simple words from "Madeline Falco," he has an instantaneous epiphany, a sensation that reveals his facilities, which Mailer captures with the camera. To present reality, Mailer's camera whirls around and around Tim Madden in a 360-degree swing; his whole existential mystery is unraveled in one piece of information. Upon reading her letter, Madden's mind is hit like a truck breaking through a brick wall, and the heightened theatrical moment apes similar grandiose moments of 1940s Hollywood films like James Cagney's "Made it ma, top of the world . . ." bellow in *White Heat* (1949) with its over-



Figure 1.4 Actor Rip Torn attacks Norman Mailer in the finale of Mailer's 1970 film *Maidstone*. Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

the-top, surreal, and *Mundi* meta-performative aspects. With its spooky, melodramatic Angelo Badalamenti score, Tim Madden's disambiguation is a result of his new subjective reality. His epiphany comes to him as he stands on cliffed stage, and in an instance where his universe is shattered, Mailer shifts epiphany into an obese anxiety in front of the camera. Madden's cries of "Oh God, Oh man" speak not just of an instant realization; but more to the Kierkegaardian idea that "anxiety is the dizziness of freedom."²⁷ As Madden, Being-for-himself, acknowledging his own existential situation in being cuckolded by his wife, set up for murder, is now free, restored to Being-in-itself. He is not just free of psychological restraints, but also is on his way to freedom of self-realization that he hasn't murdered anyone, where prior, he was struggling with a suspicion of his own morays.

Tough Guys Don't Dance Director of Photography John Bailey A.S.C. recalled the shooting of the "Oh God, Oh man" scene of the film in 2014. Where Bailey had even himself been in opposition to the shooting of such a "arch and unbelievable" scene, he noted how Mailer's "perverse laughter" took him by surprise following the scene's shooting in 1986.²⁸ Perhaps, here Norman Mailer was laughing because he had finally fixed what he felt was cinema's basic problem. Norman Mailer had

captured a subjective reality on film, and not through a blending of fiction and reality as he had done in *Maidstone*, but by keeping to pure fiction—where, to many, Mailer was best at working.

With the invention of the portable film camera, the 1960s saw *vérité* film-makers out capturing a semblance of reality by pointing and shooting at some of the darkest, fleeting moments of the decade. *Cinéma vérité* had caught the Kennedy assassination in a roundabout manner, the murder of Lee Harvey Oswald days later at the hands of Jack Ruby; the Vietnam War was beamed via satellite into the homes of every American family each night as they sat eating their dinners—thanks to the portable *vérité* cameraman. *Cinéma vérité* also filmed the Summer of Love, as well as acted the role of roving reporter on the scene during the riots in Watts and Detroit. By mixing his narrative with non-actors, freaks, boozers, friends, party-girls, and straight-edgers with the documentary itself, Mailer crafted a propagandist's distortion of reality—which is why the film is so disorienting and frustrating on the first watch.

Audiences walked away with a genuine disdain for *Maidstone* because of how it seemingly did not have a narrative in which one could follow. Mailer wanted his film to work that way. He wanted people to see his film more than once, to study its chaos. He knew that with each viewing of *Maidstone*, one would be able to see an element that they might have missed the first time around. After multiple viewings, one would see the order at work below his surface chaos. This would, in effect, alter one's subjective reality. Mailer wanted *Maidstone* to live in the mind when one was watching it. As it were, his aim was to evoke an ambiguous presence that closely resembled the aesthetic demands placed upon the audience that a film like Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950) asked for. Kurosawa's film delineated narrative through its re-telling of a single



Figure 1.5 The evoking of a visual subjective reality. In the much lampooned “Oh God, Oh Man” sequence from *Tough Guys Don’t Dance* (1987) Mailer visualizes the instantaneous moment. Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

story from four opposing points-of-view. Kurosawa's approach distorted perception in that it blended what was the truth with what was fiction. The aim for audiences to subject themselves to repeat viewing is also how Picasso approached perception. The Spanish artist understood how a singular image, a canvas hanging up on a wall, could transcend perception. A picture could change in one's mind with repeated viewings. When an encounter with a work created a first perception, his suggestion was that with a return to a form, the audience would then see something in one of his paintings that their perspective had missed the first time around. Therefore, upon realization, an epiphany would then alter an audience perspective causing a new subjective reality.

The influence Picasso had upon Mailer, especially during the early/mid-1960s cannot go undiscussed when it comes to the writer's explorations into form. In Mailer's abstract 1966 self-anthology *Cannibals & Christians* he confirms his adoration for the painter. His self-interviews are lengthy examinations of the nature of form and perspective shifts. Mailer salutes Picasso here in an observation of himself by himself that Picasso is: "the pretext to express yourself on a thousand subjects."²⁹ Seemingly, Mailer saw both film and Cubism as being very closely related modes. Of the film, Mailer felt that aesthetically cinema should be: "spooky, dream-like, and visceral." While Cubism itself was: "eerie, resonant, and full of uneasy recognition."³⁰ In *Maidstone*, Mailer works toward the crafting of a kind of meta-texture when he abstracts himself in a cubist manner. Where *Maidstone* features multiple points-of-view through a deconstruction and then reassembly that creates a cohesive narrative form through aesthetic engineering, Mailer manages to create a cubist self-portrait not just of the American ethos, but of himself by presenting Kingsley from various angles. Kingsley traverses identity on the screen before *Maidstone's* audience when the light is cast on him as a film director, *politico*, Texas cowboy, captain, orator, hipster, a fighter, a lover, a family man, and a philosopher.

These are all plays on creating a perspective shift in the film's audience that assist in the distortion of reality in the viewers minds; reality becoming an object via a sort of Synthetic Cubism collage. This is also an aesthetic that Mailer had made part of his style years before in the publishing of his 1959 book, *Advertisements for Myself*. The book finds Mailer commenting on his work, but on the work of others through a series of forms (essay, fiction, non-fiction, play, interview) arranged in a particular metaphysical order. This cubist approach was something that even the book's publisher Walter Minton saw parallels to when he wrote the book's dust jacket notes. In his summary on the book's outside jacket, Minton suggested that *Advertisements* was: "as varied and stimulating as the contradicting work of Picasso in his early years."³¹ Mailer layers this idea into his film by not only abstracting himself as Kingsley, or by shuffling the film's scenes into a Gestalt experience, but by also presenting the sociological concerns of America of the time via the inclusion of various personalities and parties. By putting numerous points of view from all those around him up on the screen in *Maidstone*, Mailer casts light upon the social concerns of the day through scenes that issue planes of perspective on late-1960s racial issues, American sickness, sex, violence, and political motivations.

Maidstone created "enforced existentialists," as the writer suggested in "A Course on Film-making." "There is no other philosophical word which will apply to the condition of being an actor who has never acted before, finding himself in a strange place with a thoroughgoing swap of strangeness and familiars for bedfellows, no script, and a story which suggests that the leading man is a fit and appropriate target for assassination."

In "The Life and Death of the Celebrity Author in *Maidstone*" (Chapter 7 this volume) Sarah Bishop observes how Mailer shows himself, "from every conceivable angle." Bishop sees how

"*Maidstone* is most memorable for what it tells us about Mailer himself." Bishop sees Mailer's Norman T. Kingsley, also known in the film as "NTK" (a play on JFK or RFK—Mailer adored the Kennedys) as a visual embodiment of Mailer's hipster from his landmark mid-1950s essay "The White Negro". As Kingsley, like the hipster is "depicted as both a kind of natural-born Method actor and a symbol of the radical creative freedom" that Mailer so easily explored in the era in his writings. Bishop also sees *Maidstone* as a film that is "about the rise of the counterculture and its utopian visions." In *Maidstone*, Mailer turns the "contemporary power structure of America" inside out by setting up his existential scenario as part of his grand vision for a new working method in cinema. In doing so, he gives both "blacks and woman equality" in the film "if not authority over white men." This is a time when the playing field was grossly uneven. *Maidstone* is a structured series of scenes that show how "the counterculture's dreams of race and gender equality fail to account for the complex problems and cultural representation fully."

Working through *Maidstone* as a kind of cinema Cubism, John D'Amico in his "*Maidstone: The Unilinear Abstract*" (Chapter 8 this volume) sees Mailer's film not just as a cubist mural broken up into multiple perspectives, he also examines the author's quixotic vision and ambitions toward a new cinema juxtaposed with the theories of Russian film-maker Dziga Vertov. D'Amico notes how Mailer's film, like others made in 1968, such as Bob Rafelson's *Head*, Haskell Wexler's *Medium Cool*, and William Greaves's *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*, are cinematic works that are in response as "asymmetric anti-war cinema." These works desired through the abstract approach, to find an understanding of "American schizophrenia" in the 1960s. In "Mailer's cubist assassination documentary," he expresses his interest in the "possibilities of editing" by abstracting the linear structure of his film in so that he might produce a work that is, as theorized by philosopher Gilles Deleuze, a "solid perception."

Examining how Mailer created the tension inside of his existential scenario in *Maidstone*, Gary D. Rhodes, in "Commando Raids on the Nature of Reality" (Chapter 9 this volume) suggests, that Mailer is creating a "sustained meditation on the connection between sex and death" with the film. As Rhodes points out, Mailer's "attack on the nature of reality" in the movie is best understood through careful examination of the complexity of *Maidstone's* editing scheme which is a "raid" on reality itself, in that it creates an "alternate reality or mind or memory." By examining Mailer's *mise en scène* in the film's various different chapters, Rhodes observes how the improvisational dialogue between Mailer and his cast doesn't show Mailer in opposition to Hollywood film, but that more, he is offering a "largely clear, understandable narrative," that is devised out of basic Hollywood cinematic structure. Mailer's approach is "not so different than many Hollywood films" in which, the audience may think that they have reached a narrative's climax, only to then be "tricked" so that the villain—here Rip Torn in *Maidstone*—can return for a standoff with Kingsley.

Rhodes contextualizes Mailer's character in *Maidstone*. He takes into account, the mysteries of character, specifically pointing to how the cast of *Maidstone* perceive of Kingsley in the same manner that the characters in *Citizen Kane* (1941) recognize Charles Foster Kane. Both men are shrouded in mystery—all the while those around them spread rumors and gossip about them. Both Kane and Kingsley are presented visually through many points-of-view. These points-of-view suggest that the film is attempting to show a "particular urgency" to evoke a reality, according to Rhodes.

Whether Norman Mailer did indeed achieve his attack on reality or create a new way of making films is up to the reader of this volume, however, there is something else to be suggested through the legacy of Mailer's quixotic design with the film. What did come out of his leviathan of a thesis is that in by approaching cinema in this manner, Mailer managed to concoct a cinema that is

adjacent to the ambiguities and aesthetics of today's reality television. As in *Maidstone*, today's reality television shows are dependent upon the placing of amateur or non-actors, some eccentric personalities, all together in a situation where the outcome is existentially unknowable. Norman Mailer manipulated his cast in *Maidstone* by blurring the line between fiction and reality, whereas, in reality television, this line is distorted when producers or "show-runners" interact with their casts on a similar level. They distort the line by passive-aggressively abating them, manipulating them into certain actions or reactions while they are in front of the camera, at times, by allowing them to screen previously shot footage—all creating a subjective reality that audiences watch at home week-after-week.

These shows often situate their casts in a remote locale and make rivers of alcohol available to any participant to ease any eager nerves. Tension is created in the *mise en scène* where drama or tension may not have existed prior. Shots, scenes, angles, intimate moments are interjected out of order and out of context during the editing process to sculpt a chemically-altered *mise en scène*—which allows for a skyscraper of Shakespearean-like drama to spring forth, all the while eliminating space, time, and reality itself in these programs on an aesthetic level.

While this kind of hyper-distortion was something that Mailer may have been working toward in his philosophy of cinema in the 1960s, he never managed to reach such meteoric platforms with his film of the 1960s. Still, it is of value to draw a comparison here in how Mailer approached his distortion of reality with how producers today are crafting contemporary entertainment through very similar methods. They, like Mailer, and even Andy Warhol and Paul Morrissey, have managed to transcend the Aleister Crowley creed that "every man and every woman is a star."³²

While the rest of the essays in this volume that relate to *Maidstone* serve the reader much in how scenes from any film live on as our memories in the mind, a question arises: what was it like to be part of Mailer's 1960s film chaos? There is no better way to know than to sit next to someone who was, arguably, closest to it. In Lee Roscoe's "Mailer's Movie Maja and Dark Lady Revealed" (Chapter 11 this volume) Roscoe, a former model/actress now journalist and conservationist, uncontrived, recounts her intimate and complex relationship with Mailer, writer and film-maker, as his mistress during his film-making period in the late 1960s. Roscoe, cast by Mailer in his films under the name Lee Ray Rogers, here explores not just Mailer, the film-maker, but she interprets his metaphysics.

Cast in *Beyond the Law* as Lee Ray, a prostitute and dominatrix that Mailer's Pope becomes infatuated with, Roscoe gives the reader an understanding of the atmosphere that Mailer devised not just during the shooting of his movies but also in their relationship. For the first time, Roscoe opens up about the making of *Beyond the Law-Blue*—still unreleased almost fifty years later. *Blue* in name, an homage to the Vilgot Sjöman film *I am Curious (Blue)* (1968), is Norman Mailer's X-reimagining of his police procedural. To compliment her account, also here are included several frame enlargements taken from the remaining original film materials of *Blue* from the private collection of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

Featuring new footage shot following the completion of *Maidstone*, Mailer and his cast of primaries from *Beyond the Law*, along with editor Jan Welt set out to amend the original work. Scissoring in a new opening sequence tinted blue, but also through the splicing in of a new finale that carried on where the original film had left off, Mailer and Roscoe can be seen in her apartment together. There, they smoke marijuana and simulated sexual intercourse in front of the camera. Mailer, then confronting her about her devilish powers attacks and kills her. Bloodying her body and face, he smears some of his victim's blood over his upper lip to make himself a sort of stoned Hitler before deciding to gaze directly into the camera. Disenchanted with the result, Mailer declined to



Figure 1.6 Lee Roscoe and Mickey Knox in Mailer's X-rated redux 1970 version of his 1968 *Beyond the Law* called *Beyond the Law-Blue*. Frame enlargement. 35mm triacetate projection print. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

release *Blue* on a wide scale, however. Unhappy with his appearance or perhaps feeling guilty over his exploitation of Roscoe, he pulled the film prints from distribution after having made it available exclusively to universities through the lines of a young New Line Cinema.³³ Mailer pulled the film and forever retired it at the “bottom of a well.”³⁴ Today, the surviving film elements that comprised *Blue*, although unavailable for viewing because of their fastly diminishing qualities, rest at the Harvard Film Archives in Boston which also houses most of Mailer's other original remaining film print reversals and work-prints of his 1960s trifecta.

In a last piece of memoir, Mailer's eldest son, film producer and director Michael Mailer discusses how, “art, is thicker than blood.” In “Over Exposed: My First Taste of Film-making” (Chapter 12 this volume) Mailer, in his short but poignant essay on the trauma inflicted upon him through witnessing his father being attacked by Rip Torn at the age of just five-years-old, tells about how, through that experience, it lead him down his career path as a film-maker.

In Joseph Gelmis's “Norman Mailer” (Chapter 13 this volume) Gelmis, a former *Newsday* film critic, sits down with Mailer to talk not just about his cinema but about movies that he likes or those that he feels have had an impact on him. In Michael Ventura's “Dance of a Tough Guy” (Chapter 18 this volume) the screenwriter and novelist also visits Mailer, but some eighteen years after *Maidstone*, to discuss with Mailer his previous film works but also to hear about his latest project *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. I have included both the Gelmis and Ventura pieces, although previously published, because

of how each lends a bit of flavor, accessibility, and additional insight into Mailer's vision of cinema, past what the writer had previously written in his two film-making essays in this volume, here, which I have attempted to interpret earlier.

Tough Guys Don't Dance: cubist noir

In David Sterritt's piece, "Mailer, Godard, and Company" (Chapter 14 this volume) Sterritt explores the similarities between Jean-Luc Godard and Norman Mailer. Sterritt points to Godard's approach in his "artfully mercurial films" which feature "elements shot directly from life." As with *Maidstone*, Godard's *Masculine Feminine* (1966), *Six in Paris* (1965), and *Breathless* (1960) all feature a "fluidity" that affords their audiences to be able to "feel existence like physical matter." *Maidstone*, like these Godard works, is an "action film" that records an "encounter with reality." Although Mailer's film approach varies slightly from that of Godard, Sterritt still sees a kinship. Not only through their homogeneous belief in God, but through their mutual vision of God as a creator/artist, and that God is each's alter-ego in the *Mundi* realm. Sterritt notes how both Godard and Mailer work in a "proclivity for the spontaneous, the intuitive, and the improvisational."

As Godard's influence on a film like *Maidstone* is seemingly unmissable, given Mailer's quixotic desire to re-invent cinema form, the auteur's influence can also, seemingly, be seen upon Mailer's structural aesthetics of his final film, *Tough Guys Don't Dance*.

Transcending the Godardian ideology that "A story should have a beginning, a middle and an end, but not necessarily in that order,"³⁵ Mailer, in *Tough Guys* distorts reality via a crafting of a hazy whodunit with plot twists and turns that bring together all of his preoccupations with existentialism, American dualism, theater in film, and the metaphysical that feature so dutifully in his 1960s work. *Tough Guys* is Mailer's postmodernist magnum opus, and it is the sum of everything he ever explored prior in his cinema and then some, but recapitulated for the 1980s.

Tough Guys, finally, realizes Mailer's ambition to direct a Hollywood film, but it's also a film noir that reverberates the lusty musings of Godard's *Weekend* (1967)—a film Mailer greatly admired. This is not to suggest that Mailer made *Tough Guys* out of veneration for Jean-Luc Godard's film, but that his interest in Godard's work comes more out of its secular and systemic relationship to his own metaphysics and penchant toward fragmentation. Disgusted with Godard at this time following the French film-maker's approach during the shooting of his *King Lear* (1987), and with a potential side project, a book about Shakespeare, acting, and process, which was to come out of a series of filmed improvisations set at New York's Actors Studio having fallen through the cracks,³⁶ in 1970, Mailer could be read describing Godard's *Weekend*, seemingly, as if he were writing a synopsis for his own later film: "*Weekend* shows us through black humor and satire and aesthetics the fact that we may all perish. Our salvation may be in cannibalism." In *Tough Guys*, Mailer deploys avant-garde stylistic tools to his cannibalistic film noir on American sickness. Mailer's film is an allegory on hedonism, self-indulgence, and the apocalyptic orgasm. Both are mechanized and running at top speed with a dream-like structure, interchangeability in scenes, and an impending dread that is visited upon their characters aided by an ominous musical soundtrack. The anti-heroes of both *Tough Guys* and *Weekend* are presupposed amongst a bevy of eccentric secondary characters who are part dream-world or flashback but also manage to twist narrative structure through cubist re-ordering of point-of-view shifts which brings on cathartic humor juxtaposed with a grotesque behavior or image.

If *Tough Guys Don't Dance* is a kind of Hollywood-meets-American Corruption doppelgänger of Godard's *Weekend*, Mailer's aesthetic then owes a debt to the French film-maker. But then along the lines of postmodernist thought, one could also suggest that a film-maker of today like Quentin Tarantino, whose similar approach to the cinema with his penchant for dialectic humor with horror, may just as well then owe a debt to Norman Mailer, if not to Jean-Luc Godard.

In James Ryan's "Pulp Fiction in Provincetown" (Chapter 15 this volume) he suggests that *Tough Guys Don't Dance* can be read as a "pre-Tarantino" work in the American cinema. *Tough Guys* uses "the same techniques and themes of baroque dialogue and lurid violence" that are easily seen today in American films like those by Tarantino but also on cable television in shows like the now-defunct HBO series *True Detective* (2014–15). Tarantino's early films *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) and *Pulp Fiction* (1994) present his bad guys as good guys, blended anti-hero mythologies through what producer of *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, Tom Luddy suggests is: "long florid dialogue punctuated by grotesque violence followed by more florid dialogue and the more grotesque violence." Tarantino has indeed gone on the record³⁷ about his admiration for both Jean-Luc Godard as well as Mailer's *Tough Guys*. In his earlier works Tarantino obviously also had a mutual adoration for narrative structuring through abstract form, much the same as Godard and Mailer. "What Mailer delivered in *Tough Guys*," according to Ryan "was an uncensored frankness of perspective on American crime crossed with a sense of changing attitudes toward such matters as class identity, narcotics use, and sexual behavior." Mailer's last film opened the door for today's film-makers with its distinctive vision of "the national culture of amorality built on decadence and criminality." Mailer's consciousness of national mood, as it can be observed in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, is also of note because of how he uses it in the film to extend and raise the "stylistic and narrative traditions of film noir, with its flashbacks, voice-overs, dark high style, and moral ambiguities."

Tough Guys Don't Dance, as a cubist rendering of film noir objectifies, then shines light on the American morays in a hedonistic era. It is done in an abstract of form that invents a new, tortuous surrealism that also features elements of absurdism in its *mise en scène*. The film creates a variation on film noir or the detective story, as it boils down the key tropes and motifs, modernizing them inside of its anti-noir repressed visual *modus operandi* to produce a new context in which audiences can tread existential allegory.

Mailer's roman noir features not a true detective in the classical film noir sense, but more so, an ordinary protagonist with "self-destructive qualities," who is a "victim, suspect, and perpetrator."³⁸ It's a "tale where the detective is only one step ahead of the reader, but braver than the average man," Mailer suggested following the release of his novel which the film is based on.³⁹ Yet film critics did not see the movie as a film noir. They saw it only as a homage, if that at all. Maybe this was because the movie wasn't shot in black and white, or perhaps because it didn't feature skewed camera angles, or Venetian blinds hanging up in the rooms where the film's narrative unfolds. "To hell with homage to noir, it is a film noir,"⁴⁰ Mailer issued in the movie's marketing materials for its theatrical release as a way to help clarify his intent.

While not a film noir in the traditional, visual sense, Mailer's film, like film noir exists in a hopelessness that prevails. All are lost, or doomed; there is an overwhelming sense of anxiety and dread that resides in Provincetown. There is no way out of the dream, as the film's protagonist, Tim Madden, is set down in a violent and incoherent world where he must attempt to create order out of chaos. *Tough Guys* plays heavily with noir ideologies like coincidence, amnesia, flashback, voice-over narration, and the notion of the double and femme fatale. Madden, as with any legitimate protagonist of the noir of the 1940s has his mind meditating on the past, much like Robert Mitchum's Jeff Markham/Jeff Bailey in Jacques Tourner's *Out Of The Past* (1947).

If there are a series of classic noir films that *Tough Guys* shares similarities with it might be films like *The Big Sleep* (1946), with its overly-complicated and dense plot with its flood of dialogue. Humphrey Bogart, in a universe of night fog and mist, sets out to make sense in his investigation, or *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), with its world where everyone is corrupt in one fashion or another. All are out to capture, not cocaine as in Mailer's film, but the elusive and highly-valuable famed feathery statue. *Nightmare Alley* (1947) presents a moral ambiguity, coincidence teetering on the supernatural and dream. *Kiss of Death* (1947) touches upon the idea of a former criminal trying to get on the right side of the law. Victor Mature and Richard Widmark are cut from the same cloth as the good and the bad. The final scene, a meeting between Mature and Widmark, is almost recreated in the finale of Mailer's film, as both saint and psychopath sit down at a dinner table to have one last final confrontation. Mailer even suspends violence on the screen in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. Faithful to the Hollywood film of the 1930s and 1940s, when his characters are killed, Mailer refuses to show the act in process. His camera pans away, or he forgets to show point-of-entry when one is shot. Further evidence of Mailer's film noir bent in *Tough Guys* can be seen in the movie's infamous trailer. Available to view on YouTube, Mailer positions a replica statue of The Maltese Falcon behind him as he sits in front of a camera and speaks directly to his future audience reading cards from the film's early test screenings which foretell of the polarizing effect that the movie would have on its audiences.

David Masciotra connects the dream world of *Tough Guys Don't Dance* to film noir through Mailer's record of purgatory in his writing. In "Paradise Lost: Norman Mailer and American Purgatory" (Chapter 16 this volume), Masciotra suggests that Mailer's film has dream-like qualities because, "like film noir," it is utterly unsentimental. Masciotra sees *Tough Guys*, as well as Mailer's early film venture *Wild 90*, as well as many of his texts as being central to the art of seeing the aesthetic underpinning which finds Mailer's world in suspension. This is a keen observation on behalf of Masciotra because "cinema is caught between two worlds." As Mailer dubbed film as belonging somewhere in a netherworld "between memory and dream."

Masciotra points to Mailer's texts like *Barbary Shore* and *Harlot's Ghost* to show how the characters in many of his works all live in a purgatory. Like Tim Madden in *Tough Guys*, Prince in *Wild 90*, but also Gary Gilmore in *The Executioner's Song*: "Their settings are often claustrophobic, and their condition is often punitive." "America is purgatory," for Mailer, Masciotra writes. Mailer suggests his characters are in a kind of stasis when he presupposes them in Provincetown during a winter season when the hot spot is devoid of residents in its off-season. Mailer's "Wild West of the East" becomes a cold, windy, desolate island of sorts surrounded by the void in the sea. In the film's dreaminess, Mailer not only suggests a visual, albeit, literal purgatory, he also alludes to it through the use of surrealist symbols and metaphysics that heighten *mise en scène*.

The characters have a symbiosis-like relationship to their surroundings in Mailer's film; they acknowledge the encompassing spirits around them. Our unconscious feels purgatory in the dream-state of the film amidst everything Tim Madden encounters because of how Mailer orders shifts in perspective as a means to light his way through the narrative. The dreaminess of the film distorts our relationship to reality, the viewer is not certain if they are in a dream or a reality. Madden awakes like Jean-Paul Sartre's Roquentin, in *La Nausée* (*Nausea*) who has become convinced that inanimate objects and situations encroach on his ability to define himself, or his intellectual and spiritual freedom, which then evokes in him a sense of anxiety. Mailer traps Madden in a purgatory so that he can induce a similar effect in his failed writer. Except objects are not forced upon him, like those in Roquentin's universe, Madden's worry comes out of tiredness of hedonism and the conspiracy moving toward him that he finds himself with after his wife has left him. He is always in

a state of hung-over-ness, seemingly from too much drink; but also because of the effects that adrenaline has had upon his veins via the adventures he has each night encountering the pleasure-seekers of Provincetown.

Everything becomes a symbol in *Tough Guys Don't Dance* that affords an audience an aesthetic view of purgatory and the void. Given that there is much talk of ghosts and spirits in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, it's a wonder that the characters aren't talking about themselves as they wait out the empty winter as they concoct their plans to not just cuckold Tim Madden, but to get rich quick through two-timing and triple-crossing each other. Madden's existential crisis is beset on the idea that each occurrence that he endures at night, the following morning he is placed deeper in the void as he becomes increasingly disoriented upon waking, yet still in pursuit of Being. Tim Madden asks if everything is happening to him, but is it really? After all, things don't make sense in the film on a first viewing. Everyone in town seems to know exactly where Madden's secret marijuana patch is in the Truro Woods, there's only one police officer in the city and he's egging on Madden's existential investigation which will eventually lead Mailer's anti-hero directly back to him.

Purgatory also foreshadows in Mailer's world. In the film's opening minutes, during a party scene, Regency knocks on the door of Madden's home. A topless woman answers in surprise to see a police officer. Also foreshadowing Madden's own subjective epiphany which will come later because of a letter he receives from a former flame, a half-nude party girl looks at the corrupt officer bewildered and says, "Oh boy, Oh God, Oh man . . ." Regency the cop, Madden's "one side of the street," then steps into the house out of an infinite blackness as if he were stepping across a dimensional line where space battles form. He steps into the lives of Madden and Patty as if he were stepping into it from a soundstage somewhere in a different ether. Mailer plants his story somewhere, but nowhere in the same instant.

Mailer adds symbolic visions of impending death in *Tough Guys Don't Dance* through the séance in the film which triggers the narrative through flashback, which also opens up the notion of the duality in the film. As in *Maidstone*, where Mailer had asked several of his female participants to dress only in white,⁴¹ in *Tough Guys* he introduces both Patty and Jessica Pond, two blond femme fatales to us wearing shimmering, white pearl essence that reminds of Marilyn Monroe elegance and glamour in her 1950s Technicolor films. Here Mailer uses surrealist ubiquity to deliver to the film's audience the "lady in white," the supernatural being. Both Patty and Jessica serve as visions to Madden as harbingers that death is looming all around.

Tough Guys Don't Dance is Mailer's most ambitious work of his film adventures, as in the 1960s his earlier films could not reach the audiences that his last film had the ability to do—thanks in part to home video. Mailer disguised all of his pre-occupations with aesthetics and form, but also his penchant for social commentary into the slickness of a commercially driven Hollywood feature film, which was imposed on the popcorn crowd without warning. Had audiences, even if critics, known in advance about the film's density, or stylistic front or Mailer's ubiquitous nature to be more art-house than multiplex, it may have received better responses. It might have even allowed Norman Mailer to continue to make more films. This is the tragedy of cinema today. Our experiences are beset upon our mindsets. This means, most often, that what we view in the cinema is strictly in response to our loaded pre-conceptions, pre-occupations, expectations and critical standards. Audiences, especially critics, tend to dislike things that do not satisfy their own interests, but also distrust things that they do not understand. Mailer called his murder mystery a "comedy of manners," because "manners tell us about society."⁴² This is an apt declaration on behalf of Mailer regarding the best way to describe *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, because while it may help audiences

to see the film's idiosyncrasies, it is also apropos of why audiences reacted to the film in such a negative manner that they did in the first place.

Norman Mailer had been a truth-seeker in experience, a phenomenological documentarian in the 1960s; he was also one of the most-looked upon cultural commentators of the twentieth century. Having commented on culture for most of his writing career, in the 1980s he took a subdued back seat. Whereas books like *Advertisements for Myself*, *The Presidential Papers*, and *Cannibals & Christians* had been cumbersome, cubist dissent on American life and letters, in the 1980s Mailer boiled his sociological concerns into *Tough Guys Don't Dance*.

In reading Scott Duguid's, "*Tough Guys Don't Dance* and the Cinema of Reaganism" (Chapter 17 this volume) the reader can see how Mailer's film can be best understood as a movie that is "a satire of the machismo and acquisitiveness of the Reagan era and its twin backlashes against feminism and the 1960s." The Reagan 1980s were synonymous with machismo, masculinity, stoicism—a return to the idealism of the United States in the 1950s. The 1960s had been filled with hedonistic indulgence. Reagan sought to punish 1960s liberalism, in an era that promoted a concept of the nation that was gendered, strong, thick, assertive, just like its president—who epitomized these values in his decision to escalate the United States's Cold War tensions with the evil Soviet Empire. The pleasure pursuits of the previous decades would have several repercussions, though. As in the 1980s, Americans greeted HIV/AIDS and the war on drugs escalated to tragic highs.

Americans were filled with greed and ambition; modern sin (à la Shakespeare) would become part of the zeitgeist that resulted out of the religious hypocrisy in Saturday night pleasure pursuit and repentance on Sunday morning with Jim and Tammy Faye Baker on television with breakfast. Everyone wanted to get rich quick, snort some cocaine—and get fucked; all the while finding some time to buy up every commodity that hit the American market. The 1980s was also a decade of homosexual panic. Homophobia was far-reaching, and violence-as-entertainment grew to new heights in a post-*Jaws* (1975) home video era. The American movie-going public was clamoring for body counts in films that featured Chuck Norris, Sylvester Stallone, and Arnold Schwarzenegger. There was a nostalgia for the Vietnam era. The American cinema of the 1980s was littered with odes to Vietnam in Hollywood and the B-cinema. It was as if Americans, or Hollywood, in some way, felt shame for losing that war.

As Scott Duguid suggests: "The backlash movies of Stallone and Schwarzenegger were also heralds of a new postmodern attitude of pastiche in popular culture that saw 'masculinity' itself as increasingly cartoonish or self-obsessed. Masculinity was both a visible and aestheticized marker of Reaganite political wish." *Tough Guys Don't Dance* becomes a film on the Reagan 1980s, when Mailer proliferates it with a hedonistic gang of symbolic creatures that seemingly represent every foul social concern of the time. The well-standing society members to Mailer's Madden, who is a failed writer milking off the spoils of his wife, are government officials, yuppies, and social status climbers who wreak havoc and death upon each other. Everyone gets laid and everyone gets killed. Here Mailer is playing God in the *Mundi* universe as his left conservative bent comes into play as he tries to show us exactly how hedonism is dangerous. Yet the flip side here in the Mailer universe is that there must be a cause and response. Where Mailer had been concerned about the state of Being in the 1960s because of our ever-growing deadening with everything around dulling, the characters of *Tough Guys Don't Dance* are in an organic pursuit of pleasure-loving because of what has diminished in American life, and their response, their call-to-arms is to return to some sort of state of primitive nature.⁴³

While machismo and homophobia are around every corner in the film, it's important to note how these concerns were in the ethos of the time of which the film was made. As Scott Duguid sees it,



Figure 1.7 Jessica Pond, actress Frances Fisher, stands on the second floor of Norman Mailer's home in Provincetown prepping to film the "blow job" scene in *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987) in the living room below. Photo courtesy of Adam Bartos.

"masculinity and femininity are functions not of gender," in *Tough Guys*, but "of whether one takes the active or passive role in sexual and business relations." Certainly, the characters in *Tough Guys* satisfy this notion. As Patty and Jessica are strong, virile, dominant females with huge egos and in control of their male counterparts, the men, Madden and Wardley are passive; bordering on castrative submission. Patty and Jessica rule the roost and are, seemingly, those who initiated the scheming that involves Regency as their cohort. The idea of the masculine female is something, as Duguid points out, that has been in the "gay cultural attitude" for many decades.

Where Mailer made *Tough Guys Don't Dance* the most enthralling is in his refusal to disavow Patty Larraine. Featured at the beginning of the film, absent for a bulk—although Madden's quest to discover her murderer becomes his occupation—Debra Sandlund's character returns again later in flashback. She is Mailer's true existential anti-hero, not Tim Madden in the film. Inspired by well-known socialite Roxanne Pulitzer, Mailer's Patty Larraine makes Madden an enforced existentialist by throwing him into a situation, where he then must respond to it. She has chosen a true Mailer existential path in that she is pursuing authentic experience on her own conditions. Madden becomes a McGuffin, existentially speaking, when Mailer sends Patty off following the séance on what Wardley suggests is a "toot." A 1930s-colloquialism for one on "a period or instance of drunken revelry; binge; spree,"⁴⁴ in *Tough Guys*, however, it can be considered here in the context of Mailer's succinct existential preoccupations with a pursuit of Being and phenomenological response.

An acronym, Toot or "Time Of Our Time," as Mailer referred to his 1998 polymorphic volume of the same name following its release, sees that Patty Larriene isn't so much out on a literal

bender but is navigating her metaphysical and existential journey into the heart of Being. Her pursuit of pleasure, life on the edge, is in an attempt to find her *American Dream*. The usage also recalls Mailer's late 1950s short story, "The Time of Her Time," which features Denise who is sexually awakened. For Mailer, Time seemingly had to do with one's subjective reality, as he has denoted.⁴⁵

Where Mailer assigns a moralistic discipline however, is in her existential transcendence which comes near the end of the film in one of the film's last flashbacks. Having plotted and schemed Wardley into giving her and Regency "moola," and set up Tim for "Murder One," and after having shot Jessica Pond in the mouth, her pursuit of pleasure or Lacan over-indulgence is punished at the hand of Mailer when he issues her a kind of mental break down. "I'm just a door . . . hanging on one hinge," Patty sits on the ground in the woods spouting nonsense, seemingly, digging for a potato à la Vivian Leigh in *Gone With the Wind* (1939), ecstasy and danger dangling off her face, seconds before she tears off her shirt and walks directly toward Mailer's camera for one more orgasm before decapitation.

Just before her death at the hands of Wardley, as she stands in the woods with Regency immersed in the light of a full moon, she reaches what Jacques Lacan deems as a state of "Jouissance." Translated out of French, as a definition for "enjoyment" in the unconscious,⁴⁶ or "orgasm," in metaphoric terms due to the impossibility the word has to be translated into the English language.⁴⁷ Lacan asserted that this unconscious state coincides with Freud's notion of the death drive, which is where one has a desire to follow a path toward their own end. This is effective, as most of the principle characters in *Tough Guys Don't Dance* drive in this direction in the film. The film was, after all, at least to one member of an early test screening: "a giant death-orgy, with a bunch of maniacs."⁴⁸ Is this what Mailer suspected was one's return to a primal, fundamental nature through the unconscious observation that negation of Being was all around? Or is Mailer merely showing his audience that Patty's response isn't from atrophy out of horror, but in fact ecstasy in adoration for death and pleasure? There is a very basic, fundamental psychoanalytical notion associated with the idea of Jouissance. There is a gap between what we want and what we desire. We think that we know what we desire, but when we set out to achieve it we find unconsciously that instead of finding bliss in our wants, in fact, we find a horror or fury. We can come too close to the edge of our unconsciousness, and the paradoxical pleasure allows one to reach an almost intolerable level of excitement. Jouissance derives itself from an overage in self-indulgence, according to Lacan.⁴⁹ And the two characters that succumb visually to Lacan's idealism are Patty and Regency, with the latter having a stroke as a phenomenological response to hearing about the death of Patty from Madden in the film's final minutes.

The French feminist Helene Cixous asserts that the term Jouissance can be used to describe a form of woman's pleasure or sexual rapture—resulting in a combination of mental, physical, and atavistic aspects of the female experience. These border on mystical communion, but also according to Annette Kuhn in her *Introduction to Helene Cixous's "Castration or Decapitation?"*, Jouissance is brought on as a trigger response to phallogentric behaviors where the feminine returns from the repressed in a male-dominated phallus culture of sex-based dialectics and attitudes.⁵⁰ In *Tough Guys*, Patty, from the opening of the film is ego-emblazoned. She is the alpha-male in her marriage to Tim Madden. Her interest however, is to explore her desires and pursue her social status. As the film's audience can see via the wife-swapping sequence flashback in North Carolina, Patty demands cunnilingus from Madden as Cixous suggests, because of how she, "wishes to take pleasure out of sexual encounters and not give it in return" through her desire to break out culturally of the phallogentric trappings in the Reagan era of male masculinity.



Figure 1.8 Patty Lareine, actress Debra Sandlund, experiences Lacan's Jouissance in *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

Jouissance and spirituality can walk hand-in-hand. Patty, in the film, becomes overtaken with the voices that she hears of “two dead whores” that died one hundred years prior across the harbor in Helltown. The voices and spirits of these women haunt Patty throughout the course of Mailer’s film, and eventually even overtake her in her existential journey, which results in a Jouissant climax. As a result, Jouissance can also overcome the female psyche in the journey to find their fully-empowered voice as well. Patty is arguably the most masculine of all the film’s characters, and as Duguid suggests, this is because: “Cinematic bloneness is not only about getting on in the world through sexual manipulation, but also the sexual allure of money in its own right. Larreine is a classic femme fatale: grasping, treacherous, tough, and tenacious.” Patty sets out to pursue pleasures in the world as the ultimate 1980s neo-feminist: she is after sex, money, society status, and female empowerment. In Mailer’s film, feminism isn’t allowed to suffer at the hands of the backlash that it was receiving in Reagan’s United States during the era. With Patty Lareine and Jessica Pond, Mailer sets his women out not to gain equal footing, but to dominate the inferior, second sex.

In the final piece in this volume, *Tough Guys Don't Dance* Director of Photography John Bailey A.S.C. remembers the shooting of the film and working closely with Norman Mailer. Bailey, working non-union under the duress of Cannon Film’s gross anti-union production ethics shot *Tough Guys* serving as D.P., but was forced to take a screen credit as “Visual Consultant.” In “Norman Mailer’s ‘Windows’” (Chapter 19 this volume) Bailey recalls Mailer’s metaphysics and the supernatural aura surrounding the production in the late fall of 1986 in Provincetown. Defending the film and Mailer’s aesthetic approach to film-making in response to the Internet’s lambasting of the film, Bailey shows that Mailer was not an inept film-maker like most critics of the time thought him to be. But more, Norman Mailer was a serious aesthete who managed, perhaps, to do something better than most directors, he captured the “visual dramatic, even metaphysical, landscape” in his work.

Norman Mailer's cinema was not laconic. His films speak volumes about the true nature of cinema, on what movies can do, and what they cannot do—all through the lens of the dream. His work shows us the depths of his artistry, and his movies help serve a greater understanding of his texts when juxtaposed with each other. While there may be some truth in the critical responses that his film work received over the years, this being that Mailer's movies were a way in which many could define a kind of cinematic dwarfism; his films were more succinct to his philosophies and metaphysical discourses than they were necessarily open to mass commercial audiences. Yet, while they may have been envisioned as commercial works, and they may have been understood as such in the context of when they were made—they are experimental ventures in disguise.

The irony of Mailer's cinema is in the fact that his work may never sit on the same shelves of that of the likes of a Brakhage, Anger, Deren, Mekas, Kuchar, or even Andy Warhol; simply because he was Norman Mailer: a pugilist, trouble-maker, left conservative, and phenomenologist. Mailer was a writer first, and to many, he had no business making films. But his cinema *does* deserve to rest up there with the work of those aforementioned film-makers. While his ideas on cinema, as some have pointed out, were not *new* ideas in the canonization of film theory, they were nonetheless, new ideas to *him*. And they were ideas that percolated out of his own love for cinema. I see no reason as to why anyone should attempt to defend Mailer's movies. They will always live on thanks to their recent release through the Criterion Collection. And as the years pass, those that stood in opposition to Mailer's films in print, or continue to do so today online, and the reasons for that opposition, will soon enough be forgotten. But Mailer's cinema will always remain, like a great painting; his films will ask you to revisit them from time-to-time, and with each familiarity a new perspective will be afforded. Whether audiences scratch their heads or find philosophy in his cinema, Norman Mailer's films represent a significant dualism in postmodernist thought in American art. As Mailer posited about this himself in the mid-1950s: "Any artwork which is considered by many to be good and by the rest to be bad must either be very good or very bad—it can hardly be mediocre."⁵¹

Notes

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- 37 *True Romance: Director's Cut* (2005), [Film] Dir: Scott, Tony, USA: Warner Brothers. DVD. Quentin Tarantino talks about seeing *Tough Guys* and how it influenced his decision to cast Laurence Tierney in his 1992 film *Reservoir Dogs* on the DVD audio commentary for *True Romance: Directors Cut*.
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- 39 Kwit, Lynn (1987), "Hollywood Foreign Press Interview with Norman Mailer," in Cannon Films, Inc., Official Press Packet for *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, Los Angeles, California.
- 40 Kwit, Lynn (1987), "Hollywood Foreign Press Interview with Norman Mailer," in Cannon Films, Inc., Official Press Packet for *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, Los Angeles, California.
- 41 Bozung, Justin (2015), Conversation with Mailer's former wife/actress Beverly Bentley, telephone, Spring.
- 42 Kwit, Lynn (1987), "Hollywood Foreign Press Interview with Norman Mailer," in Cannon Films, Inc., Official Press Packet for *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, Los Angeles, California.
- 43 *Norman Mailer's USA* (1966), [Film] Directors: Floyd, Calvin and Fosberg, Tony, Sweden. In this 30-minute black and white documentary Mailer talks about contemporary life and writing from his home in Provincetown. Of note here is how in 1966 Mailer is pre-occupied with America's reductions in forms and how the current generation of the 1960s is pursuing hedonism out of that reduction in form. Mailer also talks about America's insanity. These ideas will feature heavily in his film *Tough Guys Don't Dance* as one of the major preoccupations of several of the film's characters.
- 44 Definition: <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/toot>.
- 45 Mailer, Norman (1998), "Forward," in *The Time of The Time*, New York: Random 'House.'
- 46 Editors (2004), "Jouissance," in *The Literary Encyclopedia*, January 1. Available online: www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=602 (accessed: August 24, 2013).
- 47 Editors (2004), "Jouissance," in *The Literary Encyclopedia*, January 1. Available online: www.litencyc.com/php/stopics.php?rec=true&UID=602 (accessed: August 24, 2013).
- 48 Cannon Films Inc. (1987), "Norman Mailer's *Tough Guys Don't Dance* trailer" YouTube, January 17, 2008. Available online: www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCXbtYm3HDcOne. An early audience member

at a test screening for *Tough Guys Don't Dance* turned in a response card at the end of the screening citing that the film was: "a giant death orgy, with lots of maniacs." Mailer reads his audience report cards from the test screening directly into the camera during the shooting of a promo trailer that was used to market the film on pay cable and internationally.

- 49 Lacan Online (2015), "What Does Lacan Say About . . . Jouissance?" in *Lacan Online*, July 3. Available online: www.lacanonline.com/index/2015/07/what-does-lacan-say-about-jouissance/. Hugh S. Manon, in his Fall 2009 essay "Heading Off Satisfaction," for *The Mailer Review* Vol. 3, No. 1 (University of South Florida Press: 582) argues that one should look to Jouissance as a means to rationalize Mailer's inept abilities as a film-maker in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. His application of Jouissance to *Tough Guys* here is apt, but not in the context in which he has subscribed it. The effects of Jouissance are present in several of the characters in the film more so out of an organic response each has to American sickness that features so prominently in much of Mailer's previous work.
- 50 Kuhn, Annette (1981), "Introduction to Helene Cixoux's 'Castration or Decapitation?'" in *Signs*, Vol. 7, No. 1, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, August: 36–40.
- 51 Mailer, Norman (1954), "Lipton's Journal" unpublished manuscript, Entry #92, 24.

2

SOME DIRT IN THE TALK

Norman Mailer

Some Dirt in the Talk was first published in *Esquire*, December 1967. Reprinted with the permission of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

Wild 90 is the name of a full-length underground movie which a few of us, soon to be cited, filmed on four consecutive nights in March this year. It was done in 16-millimeter and recorded on magnetic sound tape, and since the raw stock costs of processing 16-millimeter sound and film run about thirty cents a foot or ten dollars a minute of shooting, we shot only two and a half hours in all, or \$1,500 worth of film. Obviously we couldn't afford to shoot more.

Still, for reasons one may yet be able to elucidate, the two and a half hours were not so very bad, and from them was extracted a feature film which runs for ninety minutes. It is a very odd film, indeed I know no moving picture quite like it since there are times when *Wild 90* seems close to nothing so much as the Marx Brothers doing improvisations on *Little Caesar* with the addition of a free run of obscenity equal to *Naked Lunch* or *Why Are We in Vietnam?* It has the most repetitive pervasive obscenity of any film ever made for public or even underground consumption, and so half of the ladies are fascinated because it is the first time in their life they have had an opportunity to appreciate how soldiers might talk to each other in a barracks or what big-city cowboys might find to chat about at street corners. But then the ladies are not the only sex to be polarized by *Wild 90*. While the reactions of men in the audience are more unpredictable, a rough rule of thumb presents itself—bona fide tough guys, invited for nothing, usually laugh their heads off at the film; white-collar workers and intellectual technicians of the communications industries also invited for nothing tend to regard the picture in a vault of silence. All the while we were cutting *Wild 90*, we would try to have a preview once a week. Since the projection room was small, audiences were kept to ten, twelve, or fifteen people. That is an odd number to see a film. It is a few too many to watch with the freedom to move about and talk aloud that you get from watching television; it is on the other hand a painful number too small to feel the anonymity of a movie audience. Therefore, reactions from preview night to preview night were extreme. We had banquet filmings when an audience would start to laugh in the first minute and never stop—other nights not a sound of happiness could be heard for the first forty minutes—embarrassing to a producer who thought just yesterday that he had a comedy on his hands. Finally we had a formula: get the hard guys in, get the experts out.

That makes sense. There is hardly a guy alive who is not an actor to the hilt—for the simplest of reasons. He cannot be tough all the time. There are days when he is hung over, months when he is out of condition, weeks when he is in love and soft all over. Still, his rep is to be tough. So he acts to fill the gaps. A comedy of adopted manners surrounds the probing each tough guy is forever giving his brother. *Wild 90*, which is filled with nothing so much as these vanities, bluffs,

ego-supports, and downright collapses of front is therefore hilarious to such people. They thought the picture was manna. You could cool riots with it, everybody was laughing so hard.

Whereas intellectual technicians had to hate it. Because the tip of the tablecloth was being tilted, the soup was encouraged to spill. There was a self-indulgence in the smashing of Hollywood icons which spoke not only of an aesthetic rebellion (which some of the media technicians would doubtless approve) but *Wild 90* hinted also of some barbarity back of it—the Goths had come to Hollywood. Based on the gangster movies of the thirties, the movie nonetheless had a quasi-Martian flavor, a primitive pleasure in itself, as if it had discovered the wheel which made all film go round.

Testing this brand-new little American product, cutting it, shaping it, serving it to samples of audiences, made for an interesting summer. *Wild 90* was not the greatest movie ever made, no sir, and the actors would receive no Academy Awards (because they swore too much) but the picture, taken even at its worst, was a phenomenon. There was something going on in it which did not quite go on in other movies, even movies vastly superior. It had an insane intimacy, agreeable to some, odious to others. The dialogue was sensational. Where was a scriptwriter who wrote dialogue like this?

Buzz Cameo: I ain't gonna get killed here.

The Prince: Look. You're gonna get killed, or you're not gonna get killed. But you don't know shit. You don't know when you're gonna get killed or how you're gonna get killed, and you just shut. Shut.

Buzz Cameo: The Prince. The Prince tells me.

The Prince: You're nothin' but a guinea with a hard-on in your arm. That's your hard-on. (*A sound of disgust.*) Unhh.

Buzz Cameo: How about my short arm? How many guys I put away for you, daddy-o?

The Prince: (*mimicking*) How many guys I put away for you, daddy-o. Unhh. Unhh. Unhh. (*Three derisive punches to his own biceps.*) I'll tell you how many guys you put away for me. One and a half? One and a half?

Twenty Years: Right. The other half I had to take care of. That's how good *you* are.

The Prince: (*keeping up the tempo*) Punk. Unhh. (*The arm again.*) Punk.

Twenty Years: (*jeering*) What a mistake. What a mistake. Cameo, he says he can handle Thirty-fourth Street. (*Scream of derision.*) Hah! Thirty-fourth Street he can handle. He can't handle his own joint.

Yes, where was the scriptwriter? Who was he? And the answer—is that no hat could fit his head, for he did not exist. The dialogue had come out of the native wit of the actors: *Wild 90* was a full-length film for which not a line of dialogue was written.

Well, explanations must now be promised—we may even intimate that closet history is about to be disclosed, and of an underground film! Gather near! Listen to the subtle events which preceded the shooting.

Last winter, while the play of *The Deer Park* was having its run at the Theatre de Lys, some of the cast of *The Deer Park* used to drink together at a restaurant named Charles IV in the Village.



Figure 2.1 Mailer, Farbar, and Knox in *Wild 90* (1968). The film was shot over four nights in a studio loft belonging to documentary film-maker D.A. Pennebaker. Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

Actors like to fill the tank after a performance. It is not only their reward, and their sedative, but it is possibly a way of accommodating their soul back to the place from which it was vacated by the more meretricious lines of their script. Now, *The Deer Park* was not signally meretricious, it was after all well-written, but perfect it was not, entirely honorable, no, it was not, lacunae of intent had collected, and since devils and demons rush to inhabit every gap, there were lines in the script the playwright could not necessarily defend to the death. Those are the sort of lines which turn actors subtly, even unconsciously, to drink. Because they have to use the best of themselves to conceal the worst of an author.

Well, drink they did then, and on any given night it was better than even you could find much of the company in their more or less civilized cups, eating a little, drinking away. We were a nice company, relatively free of jealousy, intrigue, or liaison due mainly, it might be submitted, to the fact that *The Deer Park* was full of passion, jealousy, intrigue, conniving, etc., and so the actors could be relaxed of that by the time drinks had come. (Indeed it is exactly in those wholesome family comedies the critics love so very much that you will find the actors rife in the green room, and everybody banging everybody up the back door.)

After drinking sessions went on awhile, they took a particularly modest form. Hugh Marlowe, Rosemary Tory, and Rip Torn had the longest parts, very long parts they were, so they were naturally the ones most in need of regular hours. Usually, they would be the first to leave, and Buzz

Farbar, Mickey Knox, and myself would go drinking into the closing, while my wife, Beverly Bentley, and her friend and colleague, Mara Lynn, would talk at the next table on whichever subjects blond sorceresses find of moment at three in the morning. Whereas Knox, Farbar, Mailer (later to be known as Supreme Mix) slipped each night into a game. We used to play at being Mafiosos. We would try to talk like Dons. We would go on so much as twenty or forty minutes at a time talking about any subject at hand in the allusive use of metaphor you can catch a hint of now and again when one or another Italian in the rackets will lay it on the line. We even picked up names. Twenty Years, Buzz Cameo, the Prince.

Of the three of us, Knox was the only real actor. He had been acting for twenty years and more, and had been in two dozen movies, half of them gangster films, he had experience on the stage and television, was a member of Actors Studio, had worked on the production of half a hundred Italian films in Rome in the last ten years, he spoke Italian fluently. Buzz Farbar, however, had never acted but for a stretch as Don Beda, the orgiast, in *The Deer Park*, a part which began as a stunt after work for him (and remained a stunt in the sense that the part of Don Beda is one of the theatre's most difficult small parts to play). Anyway, Buzz had done his best. He was a good team man, a former Golden Gloves boxer, a football star at Dartmouth, then publisher of Legacy Books at CBS—he had not been a great Don Beda, but there was probably not an actor in New York who could have been—the part requested Porfirio Rubirosa or some Castilian with Persian silk. At any rate, Buzz Farbar may have made no immortal Don Beda, but he certainly did wing a good shtarker as Buzz Cameo in each late-nightly round of the Maf Boys, and yr author who had never acted at all in any way (except every day of his life—a quip to be examined further, close readers) did his best to hold up his end as the Prince. We played the Maf Boys. It was our answer to the *Chelsea Girls*.

We even got good at it. How close we came to portraying any mobsters of certified class, I do not know, but we had experiences. Drinking our booze and acting for ourselves in the restaurant, we would get good enough upon occasion that the room would seem weightless, and the air ready to spark. There was a tension afterward to judge the value of the moment. We were either getting up a mood which was more accurate and quintessentially witty than anything worked on by actors or game players before about the subject of the Mafia, or we were merely whacked up on booze and the mystery resided in the supernatural properties of grain spirits, their ability to fog all perception of creative value, and inflame the positive judgments of misperception. Say! I conceived the idea it would be fun to get a good cameraman and film a half hour with sound of the three of us sitting around a restaurant table. So we talked about that for a time. And as the winter went by, as Supreme Mix, which is to say, Farbar, Knox, and Mailer, did the Maf Boys on the unphotographed wing a couple of times a week at Charles IV, the picture got discussed with the savor of get-rich-quick schemes worked on in a Brooklyn kitchen, and so showed promise of becoming a project you talk about with too much enjoyment ever to undertake. But we had fun. Night after night. There is a dialogue in the movie which captures a little of the style we had when metaphor was in flower.

Buzz Cameo: I'm goin' down to the Beach.

Twenty Years: (*to Cameo*) Ya know there's one thing about singin'—it leaves ya hoarse.

The Prince: (*to Cameo*) If you leave, ya know what you are? You're the prunes.

Buzz Cameo: Prunes? You're the dunes.

The Prince: Yeh. You're the real prunes.

Buzz Cameo: (*a reference to burial grounds*) Ponds 'n dunes?

The Prince: You're prunes. The Cream's comin' out your ass.

Twenty Years: You got no feels.

Farbar did not let the movie go. Calling me very early one morning, he pointed out that Mickey Knox was leaving for Rome in ten days. In the following week we had to make the movie if we were ever to make it at all. When he was reminded that we had no photographer, no lights, no set, no properties, nothing but my steadfast promise to immolate a thousand bucks (with five hundred more to burn in reserve), Farbar promised to bring together the rest of the ingredients. (That, gentlemen, presumably, was how the old two-reelers were made.) He arranged a meet with D.A. Pennebaker (of Leacock Pennebaker, inventors of portable sound-film cameras, makers of *Don't Look Back*). Pennebaker had four nights free, and he would film us for four nights. Since Knox was still playing Collie Munshin in *The Deer Park*, we could start only after his performance each evening, which meant acting must begin at midnight. No problem. Those were our drinking hours. Acting and drinking could get together like kissing cousins. There persisted, however, the problem of locating a set. For we had taken on one more ambition. We had decided to try for more than a short film about three hoods disporting in a restaurant, we would rather take off from a contemporary piece of local history in Brooklyn. A year or more ago, the Gallo gang had undertaken a war with Joseph Profaci, by repute a don capo of Cosa Nostra. For self-protection the Gallos finally holed up in a little building on President Street, while the police put the block under crash surveillance to keep them from getting killed. Well, Supreme Mix knew nothing about the Gallo gang, in fact had no desire to take a page from their material, no, Supreme Mix was looking to be another gang, the three characters created before anyone was reminded of the Gallos. Yes, we would be our own three characters holed up in a loft, down by the beginning of the film from a company of twenty-one men to three men, living alone. That would give us the situation on which we could improvise. But where could we find an empty loft, and over the weekend? No, we had to settle for a big and empty room in an office building.

Monday night, we moved into the set, sat drinking very carefully for an hour or two, looking to recapture the style of Charles IV, and finally began shooting. But we could not recover that mood. Charles IV was a drinking spa with agreeable food, it had an attractive hat-check girl, moderate lights, soft booze, you slipped into ambiente. Now we were in the empty office, in a square room, twenty-five by twenty, with packing crates, clothes hung on pipes, fluorescent lighting, and one light bulb supported from a cord. Mood oscillated in the illumination of prison. We weren't three hoods at a restaurant. We were holed up, riding each other's nerves. It was obvious we would never find an objective correlative to the question: did we do a good imitation of three topflight hoods having drinks? No, we were in a different game—the camera on us now, and the knowledge of ten dollars a minute clicking away in film and sound. Our first dialogue was wooden, aware of itself. Action lagged. As a reaction, we weren't out at sea two minutes before the picture prematurely began. After a statement by Knox that we had been holed up in this place for twenty-one days, Farbar suddenly came back, "Twenty-one days you been sucking my joint!"

It will be remembered we were working without a script. We were going to talk back and forth. In absolute freedom. Out of it, went our premise, would come the action. No one was necessarily ready, however, for this action. Knox is a hard self-centered man who likes to keep his dignity unruffled. People were in no hurry to go around calling him names in his daily life—suddenly he was getting it in a movie. It was wrong. Mafiosos rate themselves on their own brand of elegance. The

director thought of stopping the camera, but something in the action had come alive. Next, the director reasoned—the film going on this while, of course—that if three Mafiosos were indeed holed up for twenty-one days in a loft, they might not have the use of metaphor available on happier evenings—no, they might be snarling on the bone, not kingpins of the rackets now, but rather back to adolescence, hoods on the corner. The feel of that was real. So obscenities continued—they took on love's own patina of wit. Verbal action between Mickey, Twenty Years, Buzz Cameo, and the Prince flourished. Insults winged like darts, dignities rose, vanities fell—a style came out of it. The actors had an action which carried out of that first insult and went from line to line without undue self-propulsion. This action was to carry the cast through the night and the next three nights, the visits of ten other actors, nine of whose performances were finally to be kept. "A motion picture grew out of it," as they say on Puffs Avenue, although in truth you could say a motion picture staggered out of it, while toe-dancing over the bottles, and then kept its balance—although the disconcerting angle at which it careened was yet to be seen.

But we have to depart from this sketch of a narrative. It does not tell the real history of what was going into *Wild 90*. That is private, personal, subterranean, and buried in the psyche of the actors and the director. Since this director is an intellectual of sorts he could not engage in a creative act without a set of major theses to support him. While he thought he was merely engaged in a \$1,500 junket out to movieland for four nights in a row, he was actually delivering some old and close-to-forgotten experience which had been perhaps more obsessive than he realized, obsessive for years. He had thought he was making the movie as an exercise in a few nuances of a very special brand of Camp, gangster-movies-Camp—he was actually being more serious than he knew, although indeed he was not to discover this until he had spent months cutting the film and had begun to write about these matters. Then he realized that under the bed of the making of *Wild 90* were some dusty themes of singular complexity: themes such as Hollywood, acting, existentialism—no less—and the logic of the real disease of the film—no less. Not to mention old wounds of the ego.

Buzz Cameo: Twenty years. Twenty years of shit, that's what you are. You're twenty years of nothin' You're the prince of what?

Twenty Years: Listen, big mouth . . .

Buzz Cameo: The prince of my pickle, that's what you're the prince of.

The Prince: That's what I'm the prince of, your pickle—your pickle with its dirty little warts. French tickle, Buzz Cam.

Item: Do you know that back in World War II, a few of us used to walk those Army legs with this thought. someday I'm going to write a book and expose the fugging Army. And yea and lo, that was done, thanks to James Jones.

Item: Then in the postwar, we used to see movies, and flushed with the confections of new ego status, used to say to ourselves, "Someday I'm going to make a movie and expose that fugging Hollywood." And you know what happened? Two of one's books were made into movies, The Naked and the Dead and An American Dream were the names of these movies, and the first was one of the worst movies ever seen, and the second was inferior to it, or so I hear, because I couldn't get myself up to go and see it. And had nothing to do with these movies except get paid for them, in fact both of those movies were made without the author receiving a postcard from the producer, and so author could plead mea non culpa, but for the additional fact that Hollywood paid very well



Figure 2.2 Norman Mailer stars as Prince in his first feature film *Wild 90* (1968). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

for those two books, and nobody forced the author to sell them. So the author is helpless when some snaggletoothed goat-hair-bearded very late adolescent comes up in a bar, clears his throat, and says, "Mr. Mailer, how could you violate your ideals by allowing An American Dream to be sold to the people who made the movie?" Mr. Mailer must then button up and roll with the nausea implicit in the rhythms of his interrogator's adenoids, because there is no right reply left. You cannot say, "I have become a little more corrupt than the last time you saw me," to every adolescent around. Besides you have to be over forty to appreciate the good Hemingway's remark that a man once past his own last point of terminal honor, can from there on proceed only to lose more and more of his soul, and the trick is thus to sell your soul dear, to fight a tough rearguard battle and take as many of the enemy as you can. (Which presumes a God back of your soul, and devils to slay) Well, An American Dream was sold and I didn't take any of the enemy. They took parts of me.

Now, what can you know, Under-Thirty, of these passions to write a book which will expose the Army, or make a movie which will put a light to the gas in Hollywood's leaky oven? These are unnatural passions when you, young reader, have cut your reflexes on Bergman, Fellini, Antonioni, and everybody can see through the Army by now. You don't want to reform Hollywood. It has its thing, you have yours. Let Dick Van Dyke shake hands with Debbie Reynolds any day.

But for those of us who grew up in another time, and got to hate Hollywood intimately . . . do not despair of explanations. Hollywood was like a mother-in-law's mother-in-law. Locate your time

historically. This was before Kerouac. Eisenhower was just beginning to hump the rhetoric to our respectful attention, Life magazine was still confident it could show people how to live, the CIA was then invisible but for a gleam in the secretary of state's eye, the corporations were still manufacturing products which were not wholly inadequate to their uses, and packaging was dull. Newspaper editorials reflected no quiver of doubt. Harlem was still a place to visit. And Hollywood was committing harakiri with a blunt knife. For those were the years when they got the communists out of Hollywood. All those poor writers and directors who had written all the patriotic movies in World War II—they had been the only ones who believed in Hollywood, they thought of her as a peasant queen with monumental capacities for reformation. Of course a character in a novel once said of Hollywood communists that they have the strength of big-breasted women, and these movie writers and directors were stuffniks. Which is to say they were stuffy with old platitudes which had rotted in old sentiments and they loved to try to stuff such stuff into everybody's head. Once they were exiled from Hollywood, or squeezed down into black-market work, the town lost its balance wheel. Under the pressure of television, it went all the way over to what it had promised to be at the beginning—an undifferentiated androgynous daisy chain, a victim of sexual entropy. Film power passed on to Europe. These communists had been the moral center of filmland, the bourgeois ever-living ever-loving family center, or at least in combine with the analysts they had been, and they had striven to make box-office pictures about social problems with middleclass answers. "Maturity" was the word they loved. Cigars used to glisten like wet turds when they intoned maturity.

That was the Hollywood one wanted to dynamite. That silly monstrous cancerous country which ate at the best of oneself. It is just about gone now.

As a young man soon after the publication of *The Naked and the Dead* I tried to work in Hollywood for a spell. I did my best, I wanted to amass experience for a novel, and so wished to succeed in the movie business in order to have the richest novelistic experience. But I wasn't very good at succeeding. There was something about the process of scriptwriting which did not fit with any reflex of mine. Like most young writers I was a hint phonier than I had to be, and borrowed influences at large (where would *The Naked and the Dead* have been without John Dos Passos and James T. Farrell?), and the upper reaches of my novelistic brain were mixed with the heavier greases of the lower academic literary apparatus, to wit, I thought in terms of symbols, forms, allegorical structures, classical myths—you know like many another touted young talent I could barely write a sentence if there was no way to convince myself it was not on five levels. Nonetheless, I still sensed that under all the Associated Merde and Dreck incorporated into my literary system, there was still a way to create, which was the only way to do it. And that was to keep the act of writing simple. If you wrote a thousand words on a morning and they proved later to be a good thousand words, and not a single formal thought entered your conscious mind while you were writing them, well, all the formal thought in you had gone then into the writing—none of it had been fed back into the ego-pool thinking box, there to be wasted.

That was the good way to write, and presumably the good way to act and direct, and conceivably to box—it took even longer to learn that it might be the way to make love. Doubtless. The nature of anything life-giving, like a good movie or a good word, must remain secret for the simplest of reasons. For every lion of our human species there is, as we all know, a trough of pigs, and the pigs root up everything good so soon as the superhighway is laid out for them. So the best stays hidden. It must be that way.

And out there in Hollywood, I learned what pigs do when they want to appropriate a mystery. They approach in great fear and try to exercise great control. Fear + Control = Corporate Power.

Corporate Power applied to art produces a product which is on balance equal to Liberace stripped of his virility.

Now, readers, we have not been treated to this much language for me merely to beat old Hollywood on the head with my stick. I want rather to underline and soon try to analyze the fact that the process of commercial film-making has a natural tendency to liquidate the collective human entity of the film, and so it is a living miracle, nothing less than a miracle, when a good big-budget movie is made, once you know, as few do, how absolutely deadening is the productive machinery of the cinematic full-length feature film.

Consider the movie script. A man or a team of men, who have the habit of regarding themselves as writers, begin by discussing a story. It is ninety-nine to one that the story originates not with them but with a book, magazine piece, play, former movie—we can skip these steps. Working on someone else's story is like raising another man's child. The moment a writer moves away from his basic connection to that unconscious which gives original words to the pencil in his fingers, art in its turn has given up a half-life. Witness, then, these Hollywood writers, singly or in team, who hobnob with producer, director, story editor, hordes of labially directed anxiety types who talk all the time. Large fear and large control—those are the protagonists who write the script. It bears the same relation to real writing, these endless discussions about form, plot, twist, and rooting interest, that a medical examination in the Army bears to the act of love.

Then comes the director and the producer, an ugly jealous passionate fecal marriage of bitch and stud. That overworked scenario is ignited into its first roar and flame when producer and director set out to bugger one another. Indeed that's how agreeable bad movies sometimes get made. It's art by act of war, however, and the actors get ground between them.

Then we have the actors who deal with existential situations like love, sex, disaster, and death, all those ultimates whose ends are by their nature indeterminable. You are in an existential situation when something important and/or unfamiliar is taking place, and you do not know how it is going to turn out. Whereas professional acting consists of getting into situations where the actor knows precisely just how everything in the plot is going to turn out. The script is there, and from it he cannot escape very far. Acting and existentialism are therefore at the poles. If existentialism is ultimately concerned with the attractions of the unknown, acting is one of the surviving rituals of invocation, repetition, and ceremony—of propitiation to the gods. Talk of ultimates, maybe the actor lays ceremonial robes on his back in order to allay our fear of the wrath which lives in the pits of metaphysics. Ceremony is designed, you can say, to mollify the gods, to safeguard us from existential situations precisely because ceremony is repetition. There is some quality primitive, powerful, and weight free about the act of acting once you get into it, something so close to a real existential situation, yet not by real measure dangerous at all, that actors often know the delight of children, whose inner landscape you may remember is always existential, for the denouement of a situation is to a child unknown and dangerous until that moment when the outcome is perceived.

Actors have it well made then if they can enjoy the act of acting, for they may at once propitiate the gods of dread, feel the power of full men, and have the sensuous empyrean awareness of a child, not to mention his tact. Great popular actors are not called idols for nothing. They are revered as God, lover, and child all at once.

Now, of course, the model presented is too attractive. There is always for the stage actor the tension, horror, and most existential moment of the opening night, and there is besides, once the actor is not on the stage, the unspeakable insecurity of his life, the uncertainty of work, bread, love of his fellow actors, the existential (which is to say, dangerous) privations of poverty, the manic uprooting yaws of success which can propel him into a profound alienation away from the most

rudimentary clues to his identity. It is not so easy to walk through life uncertain if you are god, fool, hero, or clown, or eventually some new species of man. Rich or poor, the likelihood is great that the actor has the most existential private life of any artist—if nothing else, he is obliged to live closer than other artists to the mystery of personality itself, which is—if you consider it—related directly to the mystery of choosing one style of personality in preference to another, provided of course one possesses the power to exercise more than a single style well.

But we must follow this through. If I, living with a woman, choose a style for my personality which, crudely, we may say is not quite me, I am nonetheless in a real relationship, certainly I am if my adopted personality is sufficiently imaginative, cohesive, and convincing, that is to say, well enough acted, to make the lady think it is—forgive this—the real me. Because then the real emotions of my sweet mate with their real concomitants, her very gifts and blows, begin to rain on me, and I prosper or falter on the basis of my adopted personality. Yet if I had adopted a different style of personality for the same woman, the gifts and blows would have been different. Now think of the actor who commands a choice of adopted personalities. The particular style he takes on for any role becomes as much an existential choice as the pose of the lover—the actor is subtly rewarded and/or punished by the real reactions he arouses and disappoints in his audience, which audience becomes for practical purposes the next thing to his real mate. How disagreeable then, even brutal, is the situation of the actor when his role is not adequate to him, when he cannot act with some subtle variations of his personal style. But, indeed the actor, living uncomfortably in that psychic ground between the real and the unreal, consummate creature of modern anxiety, can find his reality only in a role worthy of his complex and alienated heart. What chance then has he in that abominable industry script we have already described or in that bucket of fecal passions swilled in by director and producer? Not to mention our patriotic apparatus of bullies, censors, and banks which hangs like insect repellent over the making of films.

No, the actor, if he is a good talented sensitive actor, is shoveled between the maw and the mangle. For if his personality now consists of a hundred personalities, they are nonetheless like a hundred fine tools. Even if he can find some relationship to the script, and be not contradicted fatally in his work by the other actors or the director, and be not betrayed by the producer, not cheated by the cameraman, nor the film editor, nor sickened too profoundly by his publicity, he, the actor, must run nonetheless into the most unendurable trap of them all which is that the magic of the relationship he and the other actors have breathed into one another despite the script is a magic which must soon falter before the tyrannical insistence of the script that all characters and events be funneled through the narrow orifice of committee solutions to aesthetic problems. So the exceptional tools of the exceptional actor, his ten hundred antennae, his blades and springs, fine nerves and subtle heart, go all shuddering through the anesthetized fields of a commercial script. he must violate all he has learned about relationship and its thousand-footed sensitivity.

Taken even at its best in the occasional script which is first-rate, noble, fine, and good—you may look long for such a script—with a director and producer who are wise, sensible in the art of interruption, illumined with those proper fires which can light a fire in the actor, and with a budget not so enormous that every scene must groan with the pomposities and platitudes of money pressing its weight upon itself, in this ideal situation, even here, with the best of honest lines to speak, the actor must still warp his art and devour his liver and/or his soul to make his exquisite sense of relationship submit to the form. At its worst, the making of films for popular consumption is a liquidation center for talent—at its best it is still a rabidly unnatural act, and everyone connected to it is, soon or late, miserable.



Figure 2.3 Norman Mailer and boxer Jose Torres in *Wild 90* (1968). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

Well, it is hardly our aim to give comprehensive listing of the efforts directors have made to break such tyranny; so it is not our intention to talk of Rossellini and De Sica, of Ingmar Bergman, Fellini, Antonioni, of Truffaut. Nor is it part of the agenda to try for a quick run through the underground film and artists so diverse as Warhol, Brakhage, Kenneth Anger, the late Ron Rice, a dozen others—their variety is extraordinary, their research into techniques, orgies, optical extravaganzas, animation, surrealism, exquisite photography and claustrophobically inept photography have slashed out a hundred indications of new trail. Nor pertinent to talk of documentaries: no discussion will be found here of the work of Ricky Leacock, Shirley Clarke, Helen Levitt, Emile de Antonio, the Maysles brothers.

No, the point rather to be made is that with every rare exception admitted, with all honor to the five or ten good commercial films a year and the fifty other such films which will seem better in twenty-five years than they do now, and with all homage to the wit of the Camp, its triumph in 007, with all credit to the technical innovations of the underground, and the occasional epic or quiet piece of genre from the documentary, the fact remains that the contemporary film does not do enough, it does not give enough of a mirror to the complexity of our century. The production of the high-budget film is too massive to be sensitive. Of course, there are rebels in revolt upon this operation and they have explored their innovations out to insanity, but they have tended to avoid the center of the problem which remains: how to get a little of the real life—always complex—of a good actor into a film. That still remains the accident rather than the rule. The good professional actor succeeds occasionally against all odds—his eight or ten or twenty years of apprenticeship, his dedicated

training, enable him to breathe a simulation of real life into the mechanical resolution of the commercial script. But at a predictable price: dead liver, soul a bit more in hock. Whereas, the greater liberty of the low-budget underground film is of necessity given to an unpaid actor who is therefore invariably an amateur, and so tends to project an agreeable, innocent, usually bizarre self-consciousness (much like the square and crazy flavor in the postures of a home movie). The underground movie tends for this among other reasons to become an inside joke, and looks for playful situations or nightmares which members of the club can appreciate out of the focus of their own games. But the average underground film is not rushing to give a mirror of the time, just an amusement-park mirror.

Now, the documentary, in contrast, is, of course, founded on our century, nowhere else, but since it substitutes legally real people for actors, the merit of the documentary still depends upon the importance of the situation, and not its subtlety or nuance. If we can conceive of putting the camera on a man in a witness box up on real trial for his real life, the possibility, although not the certainty, is present that the man may not try to act the way he thinks he ought to act before a camera. But Heisenberg's Principle of Uncertainty probably applies. Do you remember? The particle of the atom being observed by the recording apparatus is directly (unhappily for science) affected in its movements by the presence of the apparatus. So with the documentary. There is its flaw—right in the germ plasm of the documentary. The camera, recording a real man, creates a relative unreality. If I know the camera is recording me, the real Norman Mailer, playing Norman Mailer, then I am in the unhappy position of working directly for my own product, me. Consider this



Figure 2.4 Norman Mailer with Mickey Knox in *Wild 90* (1968). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

for a moment: it is almost impossible not to be false at some low level, false the way the president of a small business will be unctuous when he is interviewed about an item his company is making. Is the real-life manufacturer going to say the item is sleazy? Never. In fact, he may not admit even to himself that his new commodity is anything but good; nonetheless, the knowledge that he can only say it is good, that he has no option to do otherwise, infects everyone surrounding him, interviewer, cameraman, sound man, future audience. The fact that everybody knows what he will say, before he says it, produces that characteristic woodenness which besets the documentary, the television interview, and any photographic situation where the protagonist is there in his real name. The consequences are too numerous, the traps too consequential for the man who bears his own name to reveal a real theme to the camera.

We have then exhausted all the alternatives but the one which went into the making of Wild 90. The assumption must now arise that the director has been saying all along that Wild 90 is his secret solution to all these ills. But it is not true. The director would swear it. He would even be forced to admit that it is worth a fight to pretend it is even a good movie. If it has its defenders, it has also its detractors and some of them would say that the first virtue of Wild 90 is that we get a good leisurely opportunity to see Mailer make an ass of himself.

Nonetheless, one will pretend that Wild 90 is good. In fact, the director, prejudiced, blown up with every imperative of self-interest, actually believes that his film contributes to no less than the general weal. So he will proceed to talk about its powers for uplift.

Twenty Years: There was once a guy an' he saw a little bird who was half dyin' He was wounded. Hey, Prince, listen.

Buzz Cameo: Go ahead.

Twenty Years: So he picked up this bird an' he said, "This bird gotta be warm." He looked in the field and there was a lotta cow flop steamin'—it was warm. So he put the bird in the cow flop an' he figured that's gonna make it right. And he left—left the bird there. And the bird kinda warmed up—felt good. Started to tweet. Went tweet, tweet, tweet, tweet, tweet . . . And . . .

Buzz Cameo: What a long story.

Twenty Years: There was a fox an' he looked over the cow flop an' said, "Geez, never heard cow shit tweet before." And he walked over—he trotted over—an' he saw the bird an' he gobbled it up. Now the moral is—listen—it may not always be an enemy that puts you in shit, and it may not always be a friend who's gonna take you out of shit, but if you find yourself in cow shit, never sing. Got it? Never sing. If you ever find yourself in shit, don't sing.

What did we end up with? A picture about gangsters? Not quite. It is hardly certain there were ever three Italian gangsters like this, or three Irish gangsters, or even two and a half Jewish gangsters. Farbar, Knox, and Mailer had all grown up in Brooklyn, but they were not Italian. Still, nobody grows up in Brooklyn without learning something about Sicily. And that is what comes through in the movie—our idea of the Mob, and that partakes of the noblest spirit of comedy, because twentieth-century reality suddenly appears on the screen. It is not social reality, nor documentary reality, certainly not historical reality, nor even the reality of the Hollywood myth, no, it is a kind of psychological reality—it is our obviously not altogether perfect idea of what this movie should be like—and that proves to be very real, for it is at least evidence on the road to reality. Whereas most movies give indications only of the road to the void.

That is the nerve which illumines the picture. To everybody's surprise, *Twenty Years, Cameo*, and the Prince became more complex than characters usually become in a film. The picture took on that intricacy of detail and personality which is reserved usually to the novel or the extraordinary foreign film. It did not happen because the prime players were necessarily so talented, so improvisational, nor so deep, but because they were engaged in a way of making a movie which—considerably more than the average movie—had something to do with the way people acted in life. Yet the way people act in life is so general a notion for purposes of discussion that it may provide a superior means of focus to consider instead how people live in their dream.

It seems we have come back to the making of the film only to desert the subject immediately. A further expedition remains to us: the director's most revolutionary notion about the meaning of the dream and—its country cousin—the art of the novel. Without it, he could not truly describe the critical difference between conventional professional acting and the existential variety presented in *Wild 90*, nor could he prove his case that the conceivable reason his actors are so good is that they do not have lines to remember.

The Prince: You listen. How'd you get that cleft in your chin? Old lang syne, that's how you got that cleft in your chin.

Buzz Cameo: Ya know, I realize you guys resent me 'cause I'm the best-lookin' one here.

The Prince: You're the best-lookin' guy in the what? In this filthy hole? I'd hate to be the best-lookin' guy in this filthy hole. Wha' do you got to say to yourself? I'm the best-lookin' guy in a filthy hole.

Freud saw the dream as a wish fulfillment. It is a grand theory, but it hints of the sweets and sour of middle-class life and bouts of nocturnal enuresis. For if you are in the middle class, you do not have to make out well on a given day, you can brood about a loss, indulge a fantasy on the conversion of failure to success—yes, if you are middle class, the dream is a wish fulfillment. Art comes to the middle class on that bypass called sublimation.

But to the saint and the psychopath, the criminal, the hipster, the activist, the athlete, the stud, the gentleman sword, the supple stick, the dream is something else—a theatrical revue which dramatizes the dangers of the day—a production in which the world of the day is dissected, exaggerated, put together again in dramatic or even surrealist intensity in order to test the power of the nervous system to pass through shocks, ambushes, tests, crises, and pleasures—future impacts of which the unconscious has received warning the day before. In the quick blink of a friend's eyes, in the psychic plumbing of an odd laugh was disclosed to the unconscious a hint of treachery. So that night the scene is replayed in its complex condensation with other scenes, and the Navigator in the mind of the hipster delineates for himself a better map, figures a little more precisely how to chart a course through the possible rapids soon to be encountered in his life.

The metaphor is shifting. It now seems that everyone has not only a private theatre for dreams but is possessed of a helmsman, or scout, or Navigator, who uses charts drawn from the experience of the past, maps drafted out of the emotions, education, and miseducation of childhood, the nuances, surprises, and predictable patterns of social life. These charts—submits our proposition—are altered every day of our life on the basis of what the day's experience has brought. They are kept up-to-date in order to transport us from the present into the unexpected contingencies of the future.

What am I saying really? Nothing more or less astounding than that every mortal (but for an occasional monster or vegetable) is elaborating somewhere in his mind the conception of a huge

and great social novel. That unwritten unvoiced but nonetheless psychically real and detailed novel is precisely the map and/or chart from which the Navigator plots his course and selects his range of acts for tomorrow. (Indeed the dream may be the creative process which adds new refinements to the novel every night.) Yes, we not only possess that great novel in the map rooms of the self, but we are forever improving it, or at least altering it.

Let us ruminate upon this magnificent news. In the unconscious of each of us is then a detailed conception of a vast social novel greater than most of the vast social novels which have been written. In every last one of us just about lives a great novelist. Better than that. The Navigator not only dips into his fantasy or his dream for inspiration and information to serve up to the ever-evolving unwritten pages of his book, but he employs the goods he finds. He goes out the next day and walks the stage of his life as an actor. For we are not only novelists all, but we are actors all. Having a detailed conception of the world, accurate here, inaccurate there, we attempt not only to deal with the world on the basis of this conception or novel, but we push and press ourselves into styles of personality (like elegance or humility or graciousness or candor) which are not quite ourselves but will provide, or so believes our Navigator, a more effective mode for handling the events of our day. In short, we pretend to be what we are not. We are Actors. We are at least Actors a good deal of the time. Some of us are better than others, some more precise than others, or more passionate in our display of all-but-true emotion, but we are all vastly better actors than we suspect. At the least we are all more or less successful in seeming a little more or less sweet or powerful than we really are. Yet, and this is the horror of bad art, that social novel in the vaults of the unconscious, no matter how great, is nonetheless flawed in each of us by the misleading portraits of people and institutions we are fed via television and Hollywood. If the maps in this chart room of the unconscious are elaborate, they are also anchored on systematically induced misconceptions of society, and so are often as profoundly inaccurate as the maps with which Columbus set sail for Cathay. Of course a chart room with inaccurate maps is inviting its Navigator to courses of action which can plow a reef, and the actor who is serving as helmsman in the actions of the day may be psychotic in his lack of attachment to the reality of the wheel directly before him. Meretricious commercial art does not lead merely to bad taste, it pipes the nation toward psychosis. If you would look for an answer on why America—a conservative property-loving nation—is obsessed with destroying other nations' property, the answer can be found as quickly in bad movies as in bad politics. Which returns us to our quest. how does one get to the grail which blesses the making of a movie not entirely without honor?

Knock on door.

The Prince: Who're you? Wait. Wait. Wait. (*Picks up gun, goes to door*) Carmela. How are ya? Carmela. Hey Mickey. Mickey, look who's here. Your wife.

Carmela enters with a carton of milk.

Twenty Years: Carmela. Ahhhhh. How are ya, Carmela? Why you come tonight? I mean, we need the milk, but you shouldn'ta come tonight. Carmela, you look great. Ahhh. How're the kids?

Carmela: They ask for their father.

Twenty Years: Yehhh. (*Looks her over, frowns.*) Listen, I see you went to the hairdresser. What do you go to the hairdresser for when I'm here? I mean, I don't like you to go to the hairdresser when I'm here. What do you got to get the nice hair for?

Carmela: For you.

Twenty Years: For me? I haven't seen you in a week. What is that crap? What's happening out there?

Follow it, now. Farbar, Knox, and Mailer had a datum—three hoods in trouble holed up in a joint for twenty-one days. For that much, they were in accord. For the rest, they had each their own idea of what was going on, just as in everyday working life, if three businessmen meet, for example, at lunch, their datum could be that they are meeting to discuss some particular business. Yet each man remains his own protagonist. Since there is no written script, each of the three businessmen tends to see his own problems and feel his own personality in the foreground. Each of these businessmen has his own idea how he wants the lunch to go, what he desires for a result. To the extent that the lunch drifts away from him, he tries to maneuver conversation back to where he thinks it should be. While he is working at this, he is also bluffing a bit, pretending to be friendly one moment, disinterested another, and all the while he is up to his ears in the lively act of shaping and trying to improve his existence by employing adopted, or at least slightly adapted, personalities. He is therefore acting. For—it is worth repetition—acting is not only the preserve and torture rack of the professional actor, but is also what we do when we enter into new relations with man, mate, associate, or child—we start with an idea of the situation before us and a project in our mind (or on occasion a vision) of how this situation can or should end. Then we work to fulfill our project. At the same time, the other man or woman is working to satisfy his plan. He is also acting. Acting in some degree at least. The result is not often geared to obey either project, but turns out willy-nilly to be the collective product, good or bad. That is about what happens at every business lunch, football game, fornication, prizefight, dinner party, and improvised performance. The product is the result, the result of the efforts, hang-ups, cooperations, and collisions of exactly as many protagonists as there are people involved. In life—let us underline the fell simplicity of this—every man is his own protagonist, he is out there acting away on his own continuing project, himself. Whereas in scripts, in written scripts, the natural tendency of any writer who might be dealing with three gangsters in a room would be to present, for purposes of clarity, no more than one protagonist and one project: the other characters would be subtly or not so subtly bent to serve the hero and his grip on the plot. So the other characters would become abstracts, stock characters. So movies remain just movies, simpler in their surface than life. That is why they are enjoyable, that is why they are also unsatisfying to our sense of existence and his grip on the plot. So the other characters would become abstracts, stock characters. So movies remain just movies, simpler in their surface than life. That is why they are enjoyable, that is why they are also unsatisfying to our sense of existence.

In *Wild 90*, however, we had no script to reduce us—we were able to play through a situation with our own wit rather than with someone else's. Therefore we had an enormous advantage over an actor who has rehearsed his lines. For he has to pretend he is thinking of the line as he speaks, when in fact he is trying to remember it. That is indeed why most amateur actors are wooden—in their need to remember their lines, they can do nothing else for they are made uncomfortably aware by the bind of another man's words in their mouth that they are up there acting, and therefore exposing themselves. In contrast, we were forced, as in life, to speak where the moment led us. We were, consequently, forced to use only our own idea of how and where we wanted the picture to go, and this made for considerable intensity and concentration—which is exactly what actors look for. Moreover, the three of us shared, as shooting progressed, in the direct recollection of what we had already put into the film. So, we were forced to draw upon that instinctively, build upon it,



Figure 2.5 Bernard “Buzz” Farbar in *Wild 90* (1968). Farbar had been a friend of Mailer’s for a few years prior to Mailer casting him in his *The Deer Park: A Play*. Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

naturally, just as people collect their varieties of mutual or gang experience in any new operation. So we also developed an unspoken but not often dissimilar idea of how the movie should move ahead, and this idea was always in danger of being disturbed and in fact sometimes was dislocated by the new actors who paid us visits—wives, girlfriends, prizefighters, brothers, police—because they knew less about our life in that room than we did. Again we moved on some parallel to what the situation might be in life. If the three of us were constantly needling each other, fighting, setting up reconciliations, forming alliances of two against one only to shift again, forever assaulting one another’s egos, or putting them back together, it was different when the Outside arrived, when the police came, or our girlfriends came, for then our three separate little visions of the film tended to become one family project, we were metaphorically now more equal to a crew, we worked with the new actors to slip them, even force them, into our idea of what and where the picture should be, and the new actors worked to slide or yank the picture back over toward their idea. Conflicts, therefore, did not show via plot, or by the camera angles of hero vs. villain, rather from that more complex opposition which is natural to every social breath of manner, that primary if subtle conflict which comes from trying to sell your idea in company when others are trying to deny you. And, note this, with the same ambiguity attached to the moment, the same comic or oppressive ambiguity. For as a scene goes its way in life, we do not always know if our plans are working, or our scheme is about to be shot down, whether we are winning in our purpose or others think us a fool, we merely work to get our way and usually have to let it go at that.

That was about how our work went. We shot for four or five hours every night for four nights, never doing retakes, *never doing retakes*—for that would have gummed the experience on which we were building. Besides, we did not have the time or money. We rocked along for four nights, and finished with something like three hours of film, much in debt to the considerable skill of the lone cameraman. Pennebaker moved his twenty-four-pound rig through our scenes like an athlete, anticipating our moves, giving us fine footage to cut into ninety minutes of comedy, ambiguity, ease, candor, vitality, barbarity. Buy a ticket! But you may never get to see it. The instincts as a director are confessed to be deep and salving; the eye for editing, novelistically acute; the talents as an actor, swell, then monumental swell; financial courage as a producer, enormous; but common sense—no, I am void of that. For the last thing I said to the actors was: use any words you wish. They bathed their tongues in the liberty: obscenity pops from every pore of *Wild 90*. It evolved into the foulest-mouthed movie ever made, and is thus vastly contemporary and profoundly underground. If you live in a small town, you will not get to see it. Not if it's like the next small town. Which is a pity. For without a sound track this film is so chaste you could invite the bishop to a screening. Of course, he would be bored. Without a sound track, there's not much film to follow. Where was common sense?

But we invoke common sense with no great respect. It is obvious most of the merit of *Wild 90* is in or right next to the obscenity itself. The obscenity loosened stores of improvisation, gave a beat to the sound, opened the actors to figures of speech—creativity is always next to the verboten—and opens all of us now to the opportunity of puzzling the subject a dangerous step further.

The Prince: Ya know he's the only guy I know, does a push-up, it hurts him in the ass.

Twenty Years: He's got a big ass.

The Prince: I wonder how he got the big ass. How'd you get the big ass?

Twenty Years: Sittin.

The Prince: No, that ass is too big to get sittin.

Buzz Cameo: That's a nice suit ya got there.

The Prince: Ya know how he got that big ass? He got that big 'cause he has his radar in his ass.

Obscenity is, of course, a picayune topic for those not offended by it, but it does violence to the composure of those who are. It shatters a subtle and enjoyable balance—their sense of good taste. Yet the right to use obscene language in a movie (if there will come a day when the courts so decide it is a right) has at bottom nothing to do with questions of taste. One could show a man and woman naked in the sexual act, and yet done well, the filming could still be said to be in good taste—the film images might slip by as abstractly as the wash of waves against a piling. Yet I do not have the wish to film such a scene, good taste or poor. It is of course a problem no film director can decide in advance, for the twentieth century, our century of technology, the bomb, the concentration camp, the mass media, and the mass drug addiction, may yet be the century where the orgy and the collective replace the family. It is not necessarily a speculation to steep you in joy—in the depths of an orgy with the air full of smog, hard-beat fornications to the sound of air conditioners, nose colds, who indeed would want to film copulation in such a bag? Still, the

century rushes toward this kind of investigation. One can easily foresee a movie which will depend for its motivation, nay, for its story itself, on the unveiling of the act. Still I would not wish to be the man who directed such a scene. These days, these years, we prong into the mystery from every angle, with scalpels, seminars, electronic probes, we cannot bear the thought any of this mystery might escape us; yet the nearer we come on our surreal journey toward the germ of the creation, the further we seem removed from a life which is collectively supportable—repeat: Vietnam, race riots, traffic, frozen food, and smog—all these certified brats of science—they are by-products of the technological race into the center of the mystery. So here there is no great desire to film the sexual act even if the camera work could be superb, the actors delighted in themselves, and taste all secure. You could almost say that the heart of the sexual act might be finally none of technology's business. And work in the world of the film is work in the fluorescent light of technology.

Yet here we have a director who makes a movie with more obscene language than any film ever made. How allay the contradiction?

The director would reply there is no contradiction because obscene language has nothing to do any longer with revelations of the sexual act, it is not even much of a sweetmeat anymore for the prurient, no, obscenity is rather become a style of speech, a code of manners, a transmission belt for humor and violence—it can shatter taste because it speaks of violence, it is probably the most ineradicable measure of the potential violence of social class upon class, for no one swears so much as the men of the proletariat when alone—that has not changed since Marx's time. Today obscene language bears about the same relation to good society that the realistic portraits of the naturalistic novel of Zola's time brought to the hypocrisies and niceties of the social world of France—the naturalistic novel came like high forceps to a difficult birth. Zola was tasteless, Zola outraged, Zola's work was raw as bile, but in its time it was essential, it gave sanity to the society of its time, it gave accuracy and deliverance for it helped to reduce the collective hypocrisy of the epoch, and so served to deliver the Victorian world from the worst of its Victorianism, and thus gave the world over to the twentieth century in slightly improved condition.

Well, one would not claim the shade of Zola's talents or merits for *Wild 90*. It is in the end a most modest pioneer work. It is indeed not even a naturalistic production, not nearly so much as it is one of the first existential movies ever made. Suffice the question in this way: we live in an American society which can remind you of nothing so much as two lobes of a brain, two hemispheres of communication themselves intact but surgically severed from one another. Between the finer nuances of High Camp and the shooting of firemen in race riots is, however, a nihilistic gulf which may never be negotiated again by living Americans. But this we may swear on: the Establishment will not begin to come its half of the distance through the national gap until its knowledge of the real social life of that other isolated and—what Washington will insist on calling—deprived world is accurate, rather than liberal, condescending, and over-programmatic. Yet for that to happen, every real and subterranean language must first have its hearing, even if taste will be in the process as outraged as a vegetarian forced to watch the flushing of the entrails in the stockyards. You can ask: what point to this? The vegetarian became a vegetarian precisely because he could not bear the slaughter of animals. Yes, your director will say, but let him see how it is really done, let him know it in detail. Then perhaps he will be twice the vegetarian he was before. Or maybe by picking up a gun to defend animals, he will kill humans and end as a cannibal.

Capital, you will say, your strategy for ambushing yourself is superb. You have just done in your argument.

No, rather something may have insisted on taking us further into the argument. The vegetarian, once become a cannibal, knows at least what he has become: if the world is thus turned a shift

more barbarous, it is also a click less insane. Each year, civilization gives its delineated promise of being further coterminous with schizophrenia. Good taste, we would submit, may be ultimately the jailer who keeps all good ladies and angels of civilization firmly installed in the innocence of their dungeon, that Stygian incarceration whose walls are adorned with the elegant draperies of the very best and blindest taste. All kneel! Homage to my metaphor! The aim of a robust art still remains: that it be hearty, that it be savage, that it serve to feed audiences with the marrow of its honest presence. In the end, robust art pays cash, because in return for roiling the delicacies of more than one fine and valuable nervous system, it gives in return light and definition and blasts of fresh air to the corners of the world, it is a firm presence in the world, and so helps to protect the world from its dissolution in compromise, lack of focus, and entropy, entropy, that disease of progressive formlessness, that smog, last and most poisonous exhaust of the devil's foul mouth. Yeah, and yes! Obscenity is where God and Devil meet, and so is another of the avatars in which art ferments and man distills.

3

VISUALIZING BEING AND NOTHINGNESS: MAILER MEETS *GODOT*

Justin Bozung

If we are not actors working out a play for our salvation, but rather soldiers in an army which seeks to carry some noble conception of Being out across the stars, or back into the protoplasm of life.

NORMAN MAILER, Commentary, April 1, 1963

To look at Norman Mailer's *Wild 90* is to see a deluge of Nothingness. Some phenomenological response to the film comes out of a surveillance of Mailer's *mise en scène*; as *Wild 90* features no narrative arc or recognizable characters with which to identify. The set of which the characters are waiting is paltry, and it has nothing to offer its inhabitants except fodder to bide time. Nor does Mailer's movie feature any traditional beginning, middle, or end; there, seemingly, are only acts of repetition adjacent to one another in the form of gangster hogwash. In the film, Mailer the actor walks throughout shouting, barking, growling, stomping, punching, and yelling non-sequiturs—all making the movie, like his character Prince, belligerent, uncouth, and un-watchable. Attacking *Wild 90* from start-to-finish is a challenge for many because of the impossibility it also imposes upon viewership to differentiate Mailer—the writer and iconoclast—from Prince, the Being on the screen. And to make matters worse, Mailer's film pushes audiences away with an impecunious soundtrack (characters are barely heard, it's best to watch the movie with subtitles on), and a jump cut-y editing anti-scheme.

While these complaints about the film summarize the consensus of responses to the movie when it was first released, and today continue to malign as part of the zeitgeist film world, it was film critic Andrew Sarris, who perhaps may have best compacted these harsh sentiments about Mailer's movie in his 1968 review: "*Wild 90* is so beneath contempt that it is beyond interpretation."¹

Agreeably Mailer's film is absurd under the auspices of a traditional cinema. But to suggest that the film is an absurd work, however, is not necessarily to advocate that the movie in itself is ridiculous. These types of phenomenological responses to *90*: the audiences' generalized adverse reactions, but also the critics' unwillingness to "interpret" Mailer's film as a momentarily existential and aesthetically-driven piece of art, come not so much from any errors in *Wild 90*'s fortitude, but more, through its seemingly anti-cinema presentation.

There is a theatricality that resides underneath the surface in Mailer's film, and in observing this aesthetic one can then contextualize *90* as a movie that does not "work" under the guises of conventional standards; but more, that it is instead, a meaningful hybrid work where film and theater are conjoined to craft an existential study pre-Harmony Korine's *Trash Humpers* (2009), that utilizes many of the aesthetic tools of the Theater of the Absurd's most affluent and considered work: Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*.

The Theater of the Absurd strived to: "express the sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought."² This attention toward humanism through the abstract form is something at the core of the working order in *Wild 90* but also in *Waiting for Godot*.

Godot, like Mailer's *Wild 90*, also suffered greatly at the hands of audiences and critics on its initial reception. Through its fracturing of traditional and convention form, it too refused interpretation. French playwright Jean Anouilh's pithy review of *Godot* in the wake of Beckett's premiere in Paris, expressed an en masse disdain. Anouilh processed *Godot* in the press with a bit of the play's dialogue. "Nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful,"³ wrote the playwright-turned-critic, who seemingly missed *Godot*'s elaborate and abstract aesthetics even as an artist himself. To see *Wild 90* in a similar light would be to simply find a review of Mailer's film amended ever so slightly; to read something as follows: In *Wild 90*, "people come, people go, and nothing happens."

Mailer, in *Wild 90* doesn't offer a story—he explores, like Beckett in *Godot*, a static situation. Through the exploration of situation Beckett and Mailer express their concerns about the human condition through the abstract form. Each does this through the use of dream symbols, skewing of time, circular movement, repetition, and finally, through a reduction of language which minimizes the importance linguistics play as a viable method for expressing humanistic desires and needs. All of which show that at the heart of both *Wild 90* and *Waiting for Godot* resides a study of Being and Nothingness.

What makes both of these ontological works so analogous to each other is in how they contend to present a visualization of both of these philosophical concepts. Through the visualizing of Nothingness, Beckett and Mailer then allow for a study of Being in its most basic Sartrean shape to spring outward from within the characters of their works. Here, the idea of visualizing Being and Nothingness is of great significance to existential philosophy because in how, as Albert Camus imparted, "people can only think" philosophically in "images."⁴

Jean-Paul Sartre's existential model conjures Being through the lens of *existence* preceding *essence*. Human beings must exist in the world before attaining consciousness. To have existence in the world is to be a Being automatically just as an inanimate object can also be a Being in the acknowledgment of its existence. Here Sartre suggests this as "Being-in-itself."⁵ The Being-*in-itself* is what it *is*—an unconscious Being. To transcend this perception, to be a Being with consciousness or a being that may ponder or observe the void or the pursuit of Being in oneself or others is what Sartre calls: "Being-for-itself."⁶ If the characters of *Godot* and Mailer's *Wild 90* were circumscribed to either of these Sartrean modes they would have to be assimilated with the prior, in-itself; in that they are works of fiction; they are creations out of the mind of their authors, and it would be impossible to afford an understanding of their fictional state-of-mind or state-of-being in the endless present in which a viewer shall encounter them. As the audience can only assume that they have no consciousness of being, they serve *in-self* as objects of the author's *for-itself* existential preoccupations. It cannot be certain if the characters realize, consciously, that they are in pursuit of Being or not, because of how audiences cannot glimpse what is on the inside of the characters' minds nor those of the authors.

Both Beckett and Mailer presuppose their characters into an existential situation, and from there, they automatically become individuals of Being-*in-itself* as they exist in their particular worlds. Here they are allowed to “be,” yet also authorized to succumb to the ring of visual Nothingness of which both Beckett and Mailer also encompass them. Their positioning as *in-itself* then allows for a transformation to occur into *for-itself* via the flight into the unconscious phenomenological response to it.

Mailer and Beckett vanquish their characters to a place “beyond the world.”⁷ Beckett suspends his characters on a country road, and the viewer is never satisfied as to their whereabouts in relationship to the real—because there is *Nothing*. Estragon and Vladimir are there waiting for Godot, and in the same instance, Beckett grants them an anguish, which comes to them out of an experiencing of Nothingness; but is as Sartre also suggests an “anguish” that comes out of the freedom in Being as well.

For Sartre, Nothingness was part of our free consciousness. Nothingness is born from within oneself through personal choice. Choice represents a limit on freedom as within our being (in the physical world) we are constrained to make continuous, conscious choices. The characters of both *Godot* and *Wild 90* are free individuals. While the characters in *Godot* are a bit more ambitious regarding connecting them to reality, in *Wild 90*, Mailer’s characters are Mafioso. They are free men, living of free will. They don’t report to a nine-to-five job, they likely, don’t pay income tax, nor do they probably have a mortgage or any other trappings in contemporary society today to deal with on a daily basis. However, both sets of characters choose their destinations: Estragon and Vladimir decide to wait day-after-day for *Godot* on the country road, and Prince, “Buzz Cameo,” and “Twenty Years” all chose to hide out in the warehouse loft in Mailer’s film out of fear that they would be assassinated. This choice becomes a negation as it is also a refusal of existential existence in the world.

Nothingness in both *Wild 90* and *Waiting for Godot* is visualized through the characters’ choices within the locale that both Beckett and Mailer have deposited them. It is out of these choices that Nothingness first surfaces in their decision to wait—or to cease to be in pursuit of being in a metaphysical context. Nothingness is brought out through each of these character’s inability to pursue authentic experience because of their continuous, conscious choices which result in a kind of existential paralysis. An anguish is created in these characters through their experiencing of time via the boredom that overtakes them through the waiting in their situations. As a result, man will seek to flee anguish through action-oriented constructs such as escapes, visualizations, or visions (such as dreams). In *Godot* and *Wild 90*, the characters evoke this because confronting Nothingness emboldens the characters with the freedom to struggle and make meaning out of their situation, therefore allowing Being to spring forth out of Nothingness itself.

Nothingness is not the opposite of Being according to Jean-Paul Sartre. They are, “equal, necessary components,”⁸ of one another. “Nothingness surrounds being on every side and at the same time is expelled from being,”⁹ because both Being and Nothingness are on the same spectrum. To grasp Being by looking at Being is nearly impossible. Therefore it is essential to introduce all of the characters in Mailer and Beckett’s works into Nothingness. Being and Nothingness are conjoined in this manner. Being is subsequent to Nothingness, and to realize Nothingness, there must be Being prior.

Part I: Visualizing Nothingness

As *Wild 90* is a film, and *Waiting for Godot* a play, to see their mutual aesthetic approach is not to consider them in opposition to one another through their modes of presentation but to examine

both as works with a familial oneiric aesthetic theatricality. Mailer hinted at his film's form in a 1967 *Esquire* magazine feature article which documented the making of *Wild 90*. For Mailer, *Wild 90* was a "theatrical revue, which dramatizes the dangers of the day."¹⁰ Mailer shows his audience his pursuit of theatricality in the film's early *mise en scène*. Stuck in a single room, and on a stage of sorts, the theatrical in *Wild 90* is observed through Prince's interactions and movements about the chamber. Early on in the film, Prince, in conversation with Buzz and Twenty Years, gets up and walks out the door of the warehouse loft. While, perhaps, this may not be unusual in itself, the way in which Mailer's Prince is followed by Mailer the film-maker is more indicative of theater than of the cinema. Traditional film convention dictates that when an important character leaves a scene, the audience will in all likelihood be delivered visual information that will relay to them where that character has gone. Did Prince leave to make a phone call? As Prince leaves the room, Mailer does not treat the audience with any cut-in shot that delivers a visual context which explains his whereabouts to the public. He is not seen standing on the other side of the door; he is not perceived standing or talking on a phone, nor is he seen conversing with any other characters. Prince has seemingly walked out the door at center and backstage.

When secondary characters in Mailer's film come to visit the three Mafioso, they also just appear there, almost magically. The audience of Mailer's film is not given any visual information as to the how's or the why's of their arrival. Nor do they receive any visual nod that allows them to connect any of the film's characters to the outside world. Who are these people? And more importantly, why are they there? What is their relationship to the three men in the warehouse? These characters: the women that the mafia goons toy around with at the end of *Wild 90*, but also the policemen that visit them, all appear as if they had been standing around on the back side of a stage set waiting for their cues to enter ceremoniously. To observe these movements in *Wild 90* is to be reminded of theater, and this is the fashion in which Mailer also abstracts the traditional form of cinema—by infusing a film and theater together. While Mailer's filmed-theater isn't unique to the world of movies, what is however, is how he and Beckett both use the theater as a means in which they can then produce a visualization of both Being and Nothingness. While the theater and the movie are different mediums, where *Godot* and *Wild 90* are in unison is in their minimalist settings, but also in how these minimalist settings contend to distort our relationship to the real.

By not allowing a connection with the outside world, both Beckett and Mailer trap their audiences in a world beyond. Both the sets of *Godot* and *Wild 90* then become symbolic. They visualize an aesthetic void that is seemingly representative of emptiness and nothingness. The characters in *Godot* exist on a stage with no visual background. Both Estragon and Vladimir are given only a rock and a tree to live with by Beckett. Beckett plants them on a country road, and the road is given no context to existence. There is nothing special about the road.

In his film, Mailer disguises Nothingness. He masks it in opposition to Beckett's presentation in the open. By allowing his characters to reside in a warehouse loft, that although is nearly empty, Mailer gives his characters the opportunity to stave off Nothingness in interposition, instead of steeping them directly in the thick of it without any chance for a metaphysical denouement.

Where Mailer heightens Nothingness in his film is in the blackness that is representative of the outside world as it exists behind the characters in the windows that surround the film's cast. In *Wild 90*, the outside world is shut out on an aesthetic level, but also on a visual level via the endless blackness that he portrays through the windows, doors, and other vestibules that reside behind the characters in the film. Through this darkness, the audience is left with nothing significant to look at during the movie, but only the blackness or Nothingness that is surrounding Mailer's Prince



Figure 3.1 Mailer, Knox and Farbar set up shop as mafia hoods in a warehouse loft that will serve as in-between two worlds. Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

and the other characters in the film. The outside world is black, bleak, and desolate, and the film's audience is unable to connect the world to a reality of the outside because of how Mailer eliminates movement past the set itself. The audience must suspend reality to watch Mailer's film because of how it does not allow them to identify with its setting or situation directly. The world that the characters exist in is fictional, and therefore, can easily serve as a metaphor for a platitude of symbolic notions and premises. The delineation of setting heightens the theatricality as well and allows for the loft outside to be pondered, aesthetically, much in the same manner in which George Bernard Shaw once articulated the setting of his own *Don Juan in Hell*. For Shaw, his play resided: "in nothing, omnipresent nothing. No sky, no peaks, no light, no time, no space, utter void."¹¹

While the sets and settings of both *Godot* and *Wild 90* are visual representations of Nothingness, both Mailer and Beckett also utilize dream symbols to embrace the visual Nothingness further through the tangible and intangible. The first place this is seen in Mailer's movie is at the start of the film. In *Wild 90*'s opening sequence of shots, Director of Photography D.A. Pennebaker's camera begins the film with a movement tracking right to left across the lower portions of two ominous buildings. Mailer does not provide the audience here with any information as to their physical locations, although, given the atmosphere, the audience may likely comprehend a New York locale. Or is it set someplace else? As the camera traverses along it begins an ascension upward as it reaches an apex of the emptiness in-between the two monolithic structures. As it tilts upward, even more, a walkway sits between the two buildings. Here, in the shot, Mailer inserts a flash cut-in of the three mafia goons sitting around the table in the warehouse as the audience will soon enough meet them for the first time. This shot comes as the camera moves across the middle of



Figures 3.2/3.3 The clock on the walkway in the opening shot of *Wild 90* (1968) shows a time progression of one or two minutes when the audience returns to it at the end signaling that Mailer's film takes place out-of-time, or in a moment's glimpse. Frame enlargements. Photos courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

the walkway, and in a near-subliminal manner, Mailer intercuts to suggest that the situation within the film will be transient; they will be set directly in-between two worlds.

Beckett's use of dream symbols can be seen through his implementation of objects to craft Nothingness. Beckett has his characters play with or observe objects like the rock, the tree, the hat, a carrot, turnip, rope, and a pipe, etc. In *Godot*, Vladimir continuously removes his hat to look inside of it. He takes it off his head and examines, even searches inside of it, as if to find something—however, he finds Nothing. Estragon does the same with his boot in the play, and when Lucky and Pozzo arrive, the tramps ask to have Lucky's chicken bone, which has *nothing* to it. Beckett even uses language to precipitate Nothingness, when at the start of *Godot*, he asks of Estragon to utter, "Nothing to be done."¹² Mailer uses the walkway in *Wild 90* as a symbol to represent a mutual Nothingness, but also the surface of the clock as it is attached. Set at 12:32 (or 6:32; the hands are the same size seemingly), the clock is another symbol of Nothingness although the audience does not realize it until they have reached the end of the film.

When the movie's audience is treated to another shot of the clock at the end of the film it remains marked at approximately 12:32 or 12:33 signifying that no passage of time has occurred in the film's situational narrative, but if only, one or two solitary minutes. By not allowing time to lapse, it has frozen or stopped the characters. Making the lot, then, arguably, out-of-time or stuck in time. This notion of time slipping in *Wild 90* can also be noted in the film's opening scene in a discussion between the three mafia goons. In meeting the three, the audience learns that the three have been held up in the warehouse loft for 21 days. While this suggests a lapse of time that has already occurred, by the end of *Wild 90*, as the audience has been treated to several title cards which suggest time has progressed (the cards suggest by the end of the film that it has taken place over 26 days), it's through a final conversation between the three, that the audience understands that time hasn't moved; in fact, their stay in the warehouse has still only been for just 21 days.

To examine the blackened-out windows of the warehouse in *Wild 90* is to see also a method in which to observe the visualizing of time stopping resulting from Nothingness. With the presentation of the title cards, which arrive on the screen in the film contending that the characters are traversing "Another Day," and "Another Night," even "Another Day, Another Night," the blackness behind the characters never wavers. No matter what day it is, or time of day, the darkness always persists for the characters in the *mise en scène*. "Another Day" may be representative of daylight hours, but the audience only encounters night. In the film day becomes night, and night becomes day. Reduction in *mise en scène* is significant to both Mailer and Beckett's universe, because of how it allows the audience to shift their perspectives away from the outside world and allows them to focus solely on the behavior of the characters and not be distracted by their inherent desires to connect these worlds directly with the spirit of reality.

"Nothingness" is a kind of "geometrical place," according to Sartre,¹³ and time is bent into a circle in which both Beckett and Mailer can use it to visualize Nothingness in their play and film. In skewing time both Beckett and Mailer present Nothingness by making the circle analogous to dream.

Ciaran Ross has noted the significance of how the characters in *Godot* travel in a circle: "In Eastern mystical tradition, the circle is interpreted as a symbol of the idea of meaning 'no mind' or 'the state of being without mind.'"¹⁴ The circle also disavows the portrayal of time in both *Waiting for Godot* and *Wild 90*, as the observation of the ring juxtaposed with time also focuses their audiences upon the repetition of the acts in both of these works. In *Godot*, Beckett creates a circle through the repetition of Acts in his play. As Act One ends, the characters repeat it in Act Two, seemingly different, yet the same. In Beckett, things repeat themselves, and it is through continued

repetition that the feeling of confinement is produced. The actors in *Godot* carry on with constant repetition through their continuous revisiting of positions on the stage throughout the play. They move about the stage, just as the characters continually place themselves around the table in the center of the warehouse loft as a focal point in Mailer's film. Both sets of characters move in a clockwise movement, in *Godot* both Estragon and Vladimir move in a circle, whereas in *Wild 90*, where the characters that move in a circle do so slowly over the course of the film, cameraman D.A. Pennebaker, via force majeure works in the circle as he moves around them at the table in a circular pattern to create a closed, circular universe. By repeating the first act in *Godot* in the second, Beckett returns his audience to exactly where they started at the beginning, and Mailer returns his film's audience to the outset via the revisiting of the shot of the clock on the walkway, signaling instantaneous loop.

The loop allows for time to cease to progress and any familial sense of linearity is also negated and reduced to sheer Nothingness. It is a visual Nothingness, produced from an undercurrent of nothing. The physical movement in *Godot*, particularly by both Estragon and Vladimir, is a kind of spatial pattern that visualizes Time. The tree and the rock are posited on points on the stage in *Godot*, and they serve as pivot points for both characters to move round-and-round, choreographed much in the manner of a ballet on the stage.

As the circle becomes the frame in which Beckett visualizes Nothingness, Mailer uses circular theatrics and repetition to not only signify a stalling of time but also to create the aesthetic Nothingness in his film as well. Mailer creates an abstract circle in the movie's editing. *Wild 90* is one jump cut after another. The scenes in the film are disjointed, infused together to suggest a lapse in time, but in effect, are more so repeats of previous scenarios as the action in them is similar as it has been once before.

Using the jump cut à la Jean-Luc Godard in *Breathless* (1960), Mailer here, isn't necessarily utilizing the jump cut to show a lapse in time inasmuch as he is returning us over-and-over to the same interactions to craft a displacement of space and time, but also to produce, in his audience, a semblance of Nothingness. Perhaps this is also what inhibits in the film's audience the Nothingness that is felt in response to the film? To approach *Wild 90* in such a manner is to relinquish "negative judgment" upon it, which, therefore is, "negation as an act because it is the negation of being,"¹⁵ according to Sartre.

The characters in *Wild 90* repeat their actions and reactions all throughout Mailer's film because nothing changes in the mafia goon's holding pattern. Prince, Buzz, and Twenty Years insult each other and sling obscenities scene-after-scene. All the characters in the film do such, so the movie's audience is never able to comprehend a forward progression of time because nothing around them changes visually nor do their actions collect a forward movement or progress. Whereas a forward progress should be able to be observed in the film via the appearance of title cards, they do not allow a progression of time because of how they violate the visual aesthetic of the film itself; as the audience observes visual cues in the movie like the blacked-out windows and dizzying nature of the film's circular, direct cinema cinematography. Mailer apes Beckett's use of the circle in *Godot* because, as Laurence Harvey points out, the circle in *Godot* itself is: "Another means of destroying our sense of linear or progressive time," time ceases to exist, and the situation must be repeated within both *Godot* and *Wild 90* because of how it represents, "not a new day," but, "the same time, same place, same light, and the day will be punctuated by the same movements as the day before."¹⁶

Where the stopping of time on the clock face in *Wild 90*, as well as the mention at the end of the film of the character's continued, endless duration in the loft, may be simple continuity errors at



Figure 3.4 Nothingness encapsules Mailer and cast in *Wild 90* (1968) via the blackness that surrounds them on all angles in the background in the windows of the loft. Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

the hands of Mailer and his editor Jan Welt, they are nonetheless happy accidents. As regarding visualizing Nothingness, they do go quite a length to present the film's aesthetic existential values as explored through the concepts of Sartrean existential ideology.

These “errors” can serve as a variable starting line in which the film's audience can then move forward through *Wild 90*'s seemingly never-ending melange of other visualizations and symbols toward Nothingness that make the film the circular vacuum of metaphysics that best represent Mailer's existential concepts and his film-as-dream theology.

Part II: Visualizing Being

Through the visualizing of Nothingness, Being springs forth, because as Sartre, through the influence of Martin Heidegger, here suggests that: “Being will be disclosed to us by some kind of immediate access—boredom, nausea, etc.”¹⁷ The way in which Being is observed in both *Waiting for Godot* and *Wild 90* is through the observation of how characters are subdued by boredom. They are delayed authentic experience through the suffering of boredom. Boredom here becomes each of these play's most potent symbol for Nothingness. Being springs out from the Nothingness that Beckett and Mailer presuppose their characters in, but also from within when they each find

ways to bide time to stave off Nothingness. The Nothingness in the characters comes from their trappings—Mailer's characters, unable to leave the warehouse loft out of fear that they'll be assassinated are prime examples of negated response to the existential pursuit. Beckett's bodies too are negated in having confined themselves to a country road where they choose to wait for Godot out of fear. Godot himself, best serving the paradox of Being and Nothingness, as in his lack of presence, he represents a Nothingness, but also services Being in that as Sartre suggests: "absence discloses Being."¹⁸ As in their waiting for him he becomes a Being in their acknowledging of him as an object in form.

One way that the characters in both *Godot* and *Wild 90* each work to endure boredom or the pursuit of Being, is in acting, role-playing, and gameplay. These tidings are fodder for the human condition. Lois Gordon notes this by quoting Hans-Georg Gadamer:

Play [is the] natural activity of all living things (human, animal), and its goal is beyond "self-preservation"; it is a way of removing the "burden" of human existence as it "deepens" our connection with ourselves. If the dream functions for the same purpose—as relief and continuity, one might suggest that the dream is all we have in our desperation; it is a new form of play, a form of relief—from pain.¹⁹

At the heart of both *Godot* and *Wild 90*, the characters who are enduring boredom are in suffrage because of waiting. Through waiting, as is exemplified in *Godot*, the boredom comes from the time spent waiting, or as Martin Esslin suggests:

The subject of the play is not Godot but waiting, the act of waiting as an essential and characteristic aspect of the human condition. Throughout our lives, we always wait for something, and Godot merely represents the objective of our waiting—an event, a thing, a person, a death. Moreover, it is in the act of waiting that we experience the flow of time, in its purest, most evident form. If we are active, we tend to forget the passage of time, but if we merely passively wait, we are confronted with the action of time itself.²⁰

As it has already been suggested, time is used to visualize Nothingness in both *Godot* and *Wild 90*, but in the audience's acknowledgment of it—it is also as the catalyst of boredom. Through the experiencing of waiting, the characters also experience suffering because of the boredom that time forces upon each of them, and because of the response that it elicits Being can spring forth. In *Godot* and *Wild 90*, Mailer and Beckett use waiting as a metaphor for living. To live is to endure waiting, and the way in which each set of characters experiences the suffering brought upon by boredom is by biding their time. In *Wild 90*, it is the three mafia goons who, sitting around and arguing about the robbing of a candy store—an homage to Mailer's "The White Negro"—partake in drink to bide the time. Mailer supplies drink to his characters because, in a study of Being, it is worth delineating the unconscious. As drink, as Mailer suggests through his alter-ego Marion Faye in *The Deer Park*, gives a man the ability to "locate the truth."²¹

To drink is to bide the time, and it also, in *Wild 90*, assists Mailer's characters in the allowance of their natural actors to give rise. To ease the suffering of boredom, the characters in *Wild 90* drink as a way in which they can then segue into role-playing, games, and acting. In *Godot*, the two tramps argue and bicker to amuse themselves—they speak to each other as if not truly in conversation with one another, but are more conversing with each other from their individual unconscious. But this keeps them busy. They do this to pass the time. They do this to give

themselves a way in which they can fight off boredom in the waiting. In *Wild 90*, Prince does this as well with his cohorts. They argue, they pick at one another endlessly—they assault each other verbally with obscenities and nonsense banter.

The characters in both Beckett's play and Mailer's film fight against Nothingness in the pursuit of Being through their actions. On his own, Prince wanders about the warehouse. He stumbles over to the wash sink and compulsively combs his hair and makes faces at himself in the mirror. The characters are playing roles, in that they are acting for themselves, entertaining themselves, but also performing for guests who visit them. They put on performances for each other. Both Estragon and Vladimir stage as Ludovic Janvier notes: "little plays within plays in *Godot*," when they "appear and re-appear on the stage." Estragon and Vladimir also observe performance when Pozzo and Lucky visit them. They both observe Lucky's big "thinking" speech. Janvier further points out: "We are, at these moments, looking at a play in which certain characters are, likewise, watching a play that is being performed by them."²²

Mailer performs as Prince, and Prince performs as an actor for the others in the warehouse. He entertains them by taking their attentions away momentarily from the boredom of waiting when he traverses the room to break boxes, punch chairs, and shadowbox a light bulb like an old club fighter. A play-within-a-play is created in *Wild 90* when visitors appear at the warehouse and scenes are set up with them such as Mailer's encounter with the German Shepherd or with the ladies, who, when at the end of *Wild 90*, all stand together and face the camera for a curtain call.

Sleep also plays a role in the fight against boredom via Nothingness. In *Wild 90*, Buzz Cameo takes to bed in the warehouse at around the halfway point in Mailer's film just as Estragon makes several attempts to doze off as he rests on the rock on the stage all throughout *Godot*. Their choice is likely because, as Ciaran Ross asserts, it is in how "sleep is an escape from the void and perhaps a flight into the void," and "that sleep . . . can be seen as being identical with a state of mindlessness—being awake is—against the confrontation with emptiness."²³

Objects serve as Being, just as they represent Nothingness in Beckett's play. In *Godot*, Beckett asks his characters to bide their time with objects like the rock, the shoe, the hat, etc. Vladimir's attention to his hat, and how he studies it to discover Nothing, here now then, can also be thought out as a way in which he actively pursues Being. Because it is an activity that will stave off Nothingness.

Out of boredom the characters in Mailer's film and Beckett's play become caged animals by choice. Thomas Cousineau confirms Beckett's intent: "Beckett underlines the importance of this . . . when he says in his production notebook [for *Godot*] that the movements of the characters should imply that they are in a cage."²⁴ To cage the characters diminishes their being, and also confirms them in Nothingness. To not allow them to escape that Nothingness, which they've inflicted upon themselves by living in fear or dread, Sartre's notion of anxiety is induced, yet this is a necessary function to bring Being to fruition. Through their fear, the audience can explore the philosophical questions of Being by analyzing the structure of that free-floating anxiety brought on by forcing them to reside inside of it. As H. Gene Blocker notes, this is an essential aspect of a study of Being, and can be seen in Beckett's approach as: "boredom turns into suffering, Time, Habit, Memory—these then, are technical terms of Beckett's analysis of 'being.'"²⁵

Mailer's Prince suffers this anxiety more so than any other character in *Wild 90*. He acts like a beast who roams a cage. Prince paces back and forth; he circles like an animal on the verge of attack—like a manifestation of the primal in Michael McClure's *Beast Language*. Prince voices his version of anxiety throughout *Wild 90* with his surge of barks, growls, grunts, and yells. He paces the room, almost always in a clockwise pattern. Mailer's character rummages about the loft, he



Figure 3.5 The cast of *Wild 90* (1968) take a bow for the camera at the end of the film with Mailer speaking into the camera directly. Upon assembling everyone in front of Pennebaker's camera he loudly shouts, "Goodnight!" Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

kicks and breaks boxes; he throws a glass after he had emptied it, he punches the backs of chairs. He acts out in such a manner because he is bored, but also because he is the others' entertainment.

Where there are three characters in *Wild 90*, it is Mailer's Prince that is the film's focus. Pennebaker's camera rarely allows Prince out of the frame. While Buzz Cameo and Twenty Years are always part of the action in the film, they, however, at most times, serve as mere background for Prince at center stage. Even when there is a dialogue between the three, Pennebaker's camera will follow Prince strictly if and when he gets up to move away. He serves best as a symbol of Being in Mailer's vision, but also as a representation of the primordial id, whereas Buzz and Twenty Years can be read as symbolic objects of the Freudian Ego and Superego—but that is another analysis.

If Mailer's Prince represents the id, then the character is rooted in man's own basic, instinctual needs. Prince is primarily concerned with our bodily needs, wants, desires, and impulses, particularly our sexual and aggressive drives. He is not only a caged animal but a caveman in that regard. He barks, yells, howls—the non sequitur serves as thought montage—he cannot communicate much more than that. Prince reduces language and communicates in abbreviations because of how they best serve a symbolic nature. He is Mailer's best bet at portraying Being in Nothingness on film. This is also central to Beckett's Estragon, as H. Gene Blocker observes how the character insists mutually on a "focus on his sensations and needs of his body; his hunger, how he needs sleep . . . his pain."²⁶

In both *Godot* and *Wild 90*, the characters explore the non-sequitur. For Beckett language needs to be abstracted and broken down so that he can use it to present the Nothingness that is apparent in it to adequately convey fundamentals. Language serves both *Godot* and *Wild 90* as a method in which the sets of characters can also stave off Nothingness around them when it is used in gameplay. Mailer's words are symbols of the scatological thoughts and ideas that bounce around in the unconscious. For Beckett, the point of the talk is nil; all that remains inside the Nothingness is the means: to pass the time. To the tramps of *Godot*, words merely serve as part of the games that they play with each other. Wordplay is another way that Estragon and Vladimir diffuse anxiety, as it is for Mailer's Prince in *Wild 90*. It becomes a habit for all involved, yet it is also important to note how the use of words as a habit can also deaden Being itself. The day-to-day habits of man reduce Being, and this stops characters from being able to pursue Being directly. Mailer abstracts common language much in the similar manner that Beckett does in *Godot* inasmuch that language then becomes an act. A speech then becomes a physical gesture. It becomes part of the actor's performance along with his barks and shouts. Martin Esslin finds this theme key to a study of human condition in Absurdism as "verbal nonsense expresses more than mere playfulness. In trying to burst the bounds of logic and language, it batters at the enclosing walls of the human condition itself."²⁷

To a degree, this causes an ambiguous chaos in both of these works because of how language is then dislodged from our own conceptions of what certain words mean in the English language itself. Things begin to sound wild, hostile, and out of control in Mailer's film. The characters in *Godot* and *Wild 90* are communicating but yet are not understanding one another, they are speaking aloud to themselves. Such is the way that the audience could consider a word like "frustration." The word does not accurately portray the genuine feeling of frustration. It only defines it, but does not represent subjective response aptly; it becomes part of our daily habit of words. Language cannot accurately portray frustration, nor can it accurately describe the individual response to anxiety. These are ailments that one feels acutely but cannot be clearly defined by words in terms of the impossibility that words can generally express individual feelings. As Beckett and Mailer might agree—words are more about fundamental sounds, than meaning—they all lead to Nothingness.²⁸

Notes

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- 2 Esslin, Martin (1961), *The Theatre of the Absurd*, New York: Vintage Books: 24.
- 3 Anouilh, Jean (1953), "Godot or the Music-Hall Sketch of Pascal's Pensées as Played by the Fraternitini Clowns," in *Arts* #400, January 27, 1953, re-printed in *Casebook on Waiting for Godot*, Ruby Cohn (ed.) New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967: 12.
- 4 Camus, Albert (1969), *Notebooks 1935–42*, Phillip Thody, trans., New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 10.
- 5 Sartre, Jean-Paul (1943), *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel E. Barnes, trans., New York: Washington Square Press, 1984: 25.
- 6 Sartre, Jean-Paul (1943), *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel E. Barnes, trans., New York: Washington Square Press, 1984: 120.
- 7 Sartre, Jean-Paul (1943), *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel E. Barnes, trans., New York: Washington Square Press, 1984: 56.
- 8 Sartre, Jean-Paul (1943), *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel E. Barnes, trans., New York: Washington Square Press, 1984: 49.

- 9 Sartre, Jean-Paul (1943), *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel E. Barnes, trans., New York: Washington Square Press, 1984: 51.
- 10 Mailer, Norman (1972), "Some Dirt in the Talk," in *Existential Errands*, New York: Little, Brown: 112.
- 11 Shaw, George Bernard (1903), "Don Juan in Hell," in *Man and Superman*, Janet Baine (ed.) New York: Dover Publications, 2006: vi.
- 12 Beckett, Samuel (1954), *Waiting for Godot*, New York: Grove Press, Inc., 2.
- 13 Sartre, Jean-Paul (1943), *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel E. Barnes, trans., New York: Washington Square Press, 1984: 53.
- 14 Ross, Ciaran (2011), *Beckett's Art of Absence: Rethinking The Void*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 175.
- 15 Sartre, Jean-Paul (1943), *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel E. Barnes., trans., New York: Washington Square Press, 1984: 8.
- 16 Harvey, Lawrence, H. (1960), "Art and the Existential in *Waiting for Godot*," in PMLA, re-printed in *Casebook on Waiting for Godot*, Ruby Cohn (ed.) New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1967: 145.
- 17 Sartre, Jean-Paul (1943), *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel E. Barnes, trans., New York: Washington Square Press, 1984: 7.
- 18 Sartre, Jean-Paul (1943), *Being and Nothingness*, Hazel E. Barnes, trans., New York: Washington Square Press, 1984: 37.
- 19 Gordon, Lois (2002), *Reading Godot*, New Haven: Yale University Press: 97.
- 20 Esslin, Martin (1961), *The Theatre of the Absurd*, New York: Vintage Books: 50.
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- 23 Ross, Ciaran (2011), *Beckett's Art of Absence: Rethinking The Void*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 178.
- 24 Cousineau, Thomas (1990), *Waiting for Godot: Form in Movement*, Boston: G.K. Hall & Co.: 91.
- 25 Blocker, Gene H. (2013), *Metaphysics and Absurdity*, New York: University Press of America, Inc.: 108.
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4

MAILER INTERROGATES MACHISMO: SELF-REFLEXIVE COMMENTARY IN *WILD 90* AND *WHY ARE WE IN VIETNAM?*

Maggie McKinley

When Norman Mailer's first film, *Wild 90*, was released in 1968, audiences did not quite know what to make of it. While some critics hailed the film for its innovation (a review in *Manhattan East* called Mailer a "brilliant actor," and the film a "wild 90 minutes of bizarre, disconnected, obscene, and sometimes outrageously funny comedy"), a majority of the reviews veered in a more negative direction. Andrew Sarris called it "so beneath contempt that it is beyond interpretation"; Renata Adler argued that the film "relies upon the indulgence of an audience that must be among the most fond, forgiving, ultimately patronizing and destructive of our time"; and Pauline Kael deemed it "the worst movie I've stayed to see all the way through." Though no stranger to a harsh review, Mailer himself was somewhat puzzled by such eviscerating comments. "I thought I was going to get a very pleasant reception," he confessed to Vincent Canby that same year. "Instead, I got cockamammied in the alley."¹

That viewers were divided in their reactions to the film is not entirely surprising: such has been the case with many of Mailer's more ambitious and experimental works, wherein his refusal to adhere to any particular set of expectations has left many of his readers feeling unmoored.² Though I myself tend to embrace the stylistic roller-coaster that defines Mailer's body of work, I admittedly did not enjoy *Wild 90* upon first viewing. Perhaps this had something to do with the poor sound quality, a result of an on-set technical error that prompted cinematographer D.A. Pennebaker to beg Mailer not to release the film, and which led Mailer to remark that the film sounds "like everybody is talking through a jock strap."³ Perhaps my dislike had more to do with my subconscious desire for narrative, something that the film, in its experimental and improvised nature, lacks. Perhaps it is because I have such fondness for Mailer's written word, for his loquacious, winding sentences, so that an improvised film—which cannot possibly match that wit and verbiage—seems to fall short. Yet while his acting and directorial abilities may not match his literary ones, and while *Wild 90* may not live in the same intellectual or eloquent space as many of his novels, what cannot be ignored is the fact that this film occupies an important place in Mailer's canon. In fact, the film's eccentricities, experiments, and structure can shed light on Mailer's written word, and in turn, Mailer's fiction can shed light on this piece of cinema.

This is most evident when *Wild 90* is considered alongside *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, written and published less than a year before the release of the film. The novel received similarly schizophrenic reviews, though it garnered more positive feedback: Eliot Fremont-Smith called it one of the most “original, courageous, and provocative” novels of the year; Joyce Carol Oates deemed it Mailer’s “most important work” and “an outrageous literary masterpiece”⁴; Richard Poirier later called it one of Mailer’s “most brilliant” texts⁵; and the novel was also nominated for a National Book Award in 1968. However, a more scathing review in *TIME* reduced the novel to a “*Field & Stream* hunting yarn” whose “doggedly filthy language” is merely “grade-B graffiti,” and Granville Hicks in *Saturday Review* claimed that while the novel contained some impressive passages, ultimately it was “tripe” that “can hardly be taken seriously.”⁶ In recent years, the novel has fallen into the crevices between Mailer’s other more notable works, such as *The Naked and the Dead*, *Armies of the Night*, and *The Executioner’s Song*. Outside of Mailer’s enduring enthusiasts, the novel seems to be suffering from an obscurity similar to that of *Wild 90*, and for many of the same reasons: the novel’s dissonant structure, metaphorical nature, absurdism, and obscenity make it, in the simplest of terms, a very difficult text for many to enjoy or to understand.

Yet examining the novel in light of the film can illuminate what many negative reviews and frustrated readers often overlook in each narrative: the significant elements of wry self-interrogation and self-reflexivity that are a defining feature of so much of Mailer’s work. What I aim to argue here is that both *Wild 90* and *Why are We in Vietnam?*, through dark, often bizarre humor, profane language, and alienating protagonists, demonstrate a recursive nature that reveals both embedded self-critique and social commentary. More specifically, examining these two works side-by-side disproves a common misconception that they might be endorsing a kind of arrogant machismo—an idea that hovers over much of Mailer’s legacy.⁷ Instead, a closer look reveals inherent criticisms and occasional send-ups of this hyper-masculinity, which reveal that Mailer is subtly defying rather than meeting widespread expectations of both his public persona and his work.

From the start of *Wild 90*, Mailer alerts us to the fact that we should not—in fact, we cannot—take the film at face value. For example, the opening scene of the film emphasizes that much of the film will be tongue-in-cheek and highly stylized, as the following text flashes across the screen: “Once three guys from Brooklyn were holed up in a room and could not get out for various vague reasons.” This preliminary context reveals Mailer’s own awareness that his movie’s plot is thin at best: the characters are just “three guys” facing some “vague” circumstances, and the details are unimportant. In his directorial role, Mailer is already toying with the viewer here, suggesting that the ensuing film will upend our notions of what a narrative “should” be, or the direction a film “should” take. The text of these opening lines, recalling as it does an old silent movie (as does the use of black and white film), also suggests Mailer will be experimenting with genre and style, as he does in much of his fiction, merging camp with subtlety, drama with comedy, realism with surrealism. This genre-bending dualism that exists within the film is the foundation for its interrogations of masculine identities and grounds for more thoughtful appraisal of the movie. Indeed, as Mailer himself confessed that while he set out to make a campy film about gangsters, “he was actually being more serious than he knew.”⁸

Mailer’s interrogation of the performance of machismo is particularly evident in the character of Prince, who enacts the most drunken bravado of the three main characters in *Wild 90*. Prince stomps around, pushing over chairs and kicking boxes; he shadowboxes restlessly, and barks out angry orders and insults. He is observed to be “goin’ ape” by cohort Twenty Years (Mickey Knox)—an apt description, as his behavior is erratic and his lines are often delivered as muffled grunts (in fact, when one turns on the closed captions—a near necessary due to the film’s sound



Figure 4.1 Mailer and his wife Beverly Bentley in *Wild 90* (1968). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

problems—many subtitles simply read as “grunt” or “unintelligible sound”). While on the surface, this performance may appear to be aimless bluster, subtle pieces of evidence point to Mailer’s self-awareness of this acting style, which in turn suggests an embedded criticism of his own behavior. When Mailer speaks his early lines, for example, the camera zooms in on his face, which often displays a sly grin. Moreover, there is more than one scene where Prince is filmed looking in the mirror, making faces (and yes—grunting), but also looking directly at the audience through his reflection, thus drawing attention to his own character as a cinematic construction.

In her own study of the film, Sarah Jo Cohen speaks to this theme of reflection, arguing that “*Wild 90*, as it repeatedly calls attention to issues of seeing and visibility, provides the best examples of Mailer’s effort to seize control of his visual representation in order to produce a record of his masculinity,” a record which, in the framework of Cohen’s argument, will also allow him to “unmake” the Jewishness that threatens to feminize him.⁹ Cohen argues that the mirror scenes are particularly indicative of this for “Mailer can see both himself and the actors behind him; he can also control his image, making sure his mane and signature sneer are exactly as he wants them to appear.”¹⁰ While Cohen’s points about the film’s allusions to the historical feminization of Jewish masculinity are insightful, what her argument misses is the humor inherent in *Wild 90*. Rather than understanding Prince to be anxiously “making masculinity and unmaking Jewishness,” I would argue that he is actually making masculinity and *unmaking* masculinity at the same time, in a more playful manner. He is in control of his image, but the control is not merely based in an attempt to “prove” or “record”

that he is a tough guy; rather, it is to deliberately question the tough guy persona for which Mailer himself had become infamous.¹¹

Thus, we might also see these scenes as winking nods to hyperbolic reflections of Mailer in the character of Prince. As Mailer himself stated, “Since I’ve been a sort of *notorious*—if you will—*character* all these years, it was inevitable that I should make movies.”¹² The exaggerated performance he offers in *Wild 90* seems to recursively refer to this “notorious character” that he and the public have shaped together. Mailer was certainly aware of maintaining both a public and private self, his “real” identity (if, in fact, such a thing can be said to exist) refracted across his various roles. His glimpses in the mirror offer a sense of this self-awareness and multiplicity, forcing the audience to wonder whether they are seeing Prince in the mirror, Mailer in the mirror, or Mailer’s public persona in the mirror.

A similar effect is achieved in Prince’s comments at the end of *Wild 90*. Turning directly to face the camera this time, rather than merely glancing at it surreptitiously through his reflection, Prince says, “I wanna talk to the audience: may I have the camera on me please.” He goes on to say that viewers have been watching this courtesy of the CIA, and adds (with another surreptitious grin) that he has been reading Norman Mailer—his favorite author, naturally. All of these comments are references to *being watched*, both within the context of the film and, perhaps, in his own life as the “real” Norman Mailer. In breaking down the fourth wall here, he has called into question any notion of what is real versus what is performance, a stylistic choice that underscores the film’s interrogation of its own representations.

Interestingly, Renata Adler (who offered one of the more negative reviews of the film) acknowledged this self-reflexive element of the film, calling *Wild 90* a “subsurface contest for the attention of the camera,” where Mailer is “constantly watching for the effect of his own words on the other two.” Adler’s interpretation here is accurate—however, she sees this “subsurface contest”¹³ as an accident and a failure, a fault that points to Mailer’s subpar acting and undermines any loftier cinematic goals he might have had. Yet this contest for attention and self-awareness is, I would suggest, where the film’s artistic value lies. Mailer as an actor is entirely aware that he is performing, and within the film, Prince too is entirely aware that *he* is also performing for the other characters, a phenomenon that then creates a kind of cinematic Droste Effect. This in turn lends the film its recursive quality and draws attention to the highly constructed performance of masculine identity.

The film’s occasionally ridiculous and generally aimless dialogue, however, often disguise this underlying message. For example, the film opens with Prince, Twenty Years, and Cameo (Buzz Farbar) engaged in a childish back and forth about whose feet smell worse, and they continue to trade insults about being fat, cheap, lazy, and feminine (on more than one occasion, one accuses another of having “no balls”). The men play with their guns, wrestle like boys on a playground, and make mundane conversation laced with obscenity (e.g. “I am a student of farts”; “fuck-ass, fuck-ass, we need some cunt in this place”). Whenever anyone attempts to say anything that threatens to be of import or intellectual weight, they are interrupted; for example, at one point, Prince begins to muse, “An object of art has one interest . . .” yet he is distracted by another insult and never finishes the thought.

Though this unscripted dialogue tests the audience’s patience, its presence (indeed, its persistence) is key to what Mailer called the film’s “comedy of manners,” and it enhances the ironies and contradictions of the work.¹⁴ In other words, the dialogue allows the film to be a comic meditation of the characters’ behavior as well as a serious evaluation: in its very exaggeration, it mocks the same overblown machismo it performs. This may have been what Mailer was attempting

to explain in “Some Dirt in the Talk,” when he said that “bona fide tough guys, invited for nothing, usually laugh their heads off at the film” while “white collar workers and intellectual technicians of the communications industries also invited for nothing tend to regard the picture in a vault of silence.”¹⁵ That is, the tough guys get it not because they are inherently more masculine than other viewers, but because they get the joke: they see through the performance straight to the posturing, because the “tough guy” himself is a character. If anything, Mailer makes that macho performance even easier to see in this film than in “real” life, simply because the characters are so obviously presenting an inflated front. As he says, *Wild 90* is funny precisely because it “is filled with nothing so much as these vanities, bluffs, ego-supports, and downright collapses of front.”¹⁶ This does not mean that the film’s humor is suited to every viewer’s personal taste, but it does mean that the film intends to expose the paradoxical fragility of the tough guy pose, drawing attention to the “collapses of front” that inevitably result from hyper-masculine or “macho” behavior.

Moreover, it is important to remember that Mailer has complex and specific notions of what masculinity is, and the masculinity performed in *Wild 90* does not reflect these definitions. As he would state repeatedly throughout his career (and perhaps most notably in 1971’s *The Prisoner of Sex*) masculinity is something that must be earned. A man must test his courage, stare down the existential abyss, and fight for his manhood. “Masculinity is not something given to you, something you’re born with, but something you gain,” Mailer wrote in *Cannibals and Christians*. “And you gain it by winning small battles with honor.”¹⁷ *Wild 90* displays no such test of courage, nor do any of the characters appear to win any recognizable, honorable battles. As Mailer himself notes, the characters in his film are “snarling on the bone, not kingpins of the rackets now, but rather back to adolescence, hoods on the corner.”¹⁸ They are not men, but boys—or more accurately, men acting like boys. Thus the film observes the way men try valiantly but mistakenly to fit some preexisting notion of masculinity, whereby they attempt to maintain some sense of their manhood by swearing, touting weapons, lobbing insults, and differentiating themselves from the feminine by using all manner of offensive epithets to describe women. Ultimately, we laugh at these characters not because they perform these masculinities poorly, but because their foundational assumption that this is what it means to be masculine is so misguided as to seem comic.

The setting of the film is also suggestive of the limitations of such definitions of masculinity, and of the pressure to be a “tough guy.” It is significant, for instance, that the men are literally trapped, confined to one room, just as they are confined to the particular set of expectations, which they perform in order to assure themselves and one another that they still have some sense of strength or power, despite being deprived of the freedom of the outside world. Occasionally, there are interruptions in the performance, as though the characters themselves are recognizing the futility and emptiness of their own “vanities, bluffs, and ego supports.” Notably, for instance, Cameo reflects on the significance (or lack thereof) of the characters’ nicknames for one another, musing aloud, apropos of nothing: “Twenty Years of nothing, the Prince of what?” His query is rhetorical, but his remark hangs in the air, a brief but significant moment of profundity that interrupts the outrageous banter.

All of these details—the stripped down, unglamorous setting, the unscripted dialogue—fall under the “*cinéma vérité*” effect Mailer was attempting to achieve in his film. Mailer confessed his belief that the film without a script is more akin to a dream, whereupon the actors can map out the future: that dream, he stated, is “a theatrical revue which dramatizes the dangers of the day—a production in which the world of the day is dissected, exaggerated, put together again in dramatic or even surrealist intensity in order to test the power of the nervous system.”¹⁹ In other words, improvisation exaggerates reality in order to interrogate it, to test it for both its merits and flaws. In



Figure 4.2 Mailer confronts a German Shepherd in *Wild 90* (1968) as an homage to Edward Albee's *Zoo Story*. Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

other words, the *cinéma vérité* style Mailer deploys in *Wild 90* does not aim to merely reflect reality so much as it attempts to unearth meaning by dramatizing or exaggerating “real” life.

In adopting this style, Mailer hoped to reveal more truths and realities than were present in the typical Hollywood film. And to a certain degree, the film is able to achieve this semblance of reality, in that it brings out more organic mannerisms, the kind of restless movements, mundane conversations, and trivial arguments that would arise between any group of people trapped in a small room together. Yet this film also questions the very reality it purports to present, thus highlighting the dualism inherent in the project. The film's humorous self-reflexivity blurs the lines between performance and reality, levity and gravitas, authenticity and inauthenticity, making any glimpse of reality merely transient. Consider Mailer's own comment that he was the only cast member “who had never acted at all in any way (except every day of his life—a quip to be examined further, close readers)”: this statement is itself a plea for audiences to see that he is playing with us, undermining his own public identity.²⁰ Perhaps, then, this points to the fundamental paradox of *cinéma vérité*: that nothing in cinema can ever truly be real, or at the very least, that it will be impossible to discern what is real from what is not. Thus, the film becomes a comment on authenticity and its impossibility on screen—and even, at times, in the identities we perform in “real” life.

A similar effect is created in *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, a novel whose subject matter varies greatly from *Wild 90*, but whose recursive structure, absurd surrealist humor, and interrogation of

gendered performances are all decidedly familiar. Moreover, a close analysis of these elements of the novel offer some of the best evidence that the subsequent film, for all of its faults, deserves attention for its integral role in Mailer's oeuvre, specifically for the ways it demonstrates Mailer's attempts to translate to cinema the surreal, obscenely poetic, allegorical comment on performed identities that he had accomplished in literature. Because of the stylistic and artistic similarities between these two particular narratives, examining one alongside the other can be mutually instructive, for when considering these as linked narratives, those more partial to the novel might be able to gain a better understanding of and appreciation of the film, and vice versa. More specifically, we might be able to better understand the conversation Mailer is staging about masculinity, as he questions its performative aspects and its problematic consequences.

Why Are We in Vietnam? follows D.J. (the novel's narrator), his father Rusty, and his friend Tex as they embark on a guided hunting trip to Alaska. Despite the book's title, the war in Vietnam is only directly mentioned once in the last line of the novel, but the narrative can nevertheless be seen as an allegory for Vietnam. More specifically, an extended and indirect answer to the question posed in the title can be found in the novel's interrogation of gender, with the aggressive, hypermasculine behavior of the novel's characters symbolizing the hawkish American attitudes that left the military mired in Vietnam. In a letter to Walter Minton at Putnam in 1967, Mailer himself summarized this aim, instructing Minton to convey in the book's press that "Norman Mailer is saying, 'This perhaps is what we Americans are like, and this may be one of the reasons we're engaged in such a war.'"²¹ While many critics have acknowledged this allegory, Richard Fulgham has provided one of the most astute interpretations of the novel's intentions, also speaking to the underlying criticisms of traditional masculine behavior. As he observes, in *Vietnam* "Mailer is blaming our presence in Southeast Asia on the collective heart of the hunter"²² and is also offering an "intentional parody of Hemingway's claim that killing a big animal was somehow noble."²³ Fulgham argues that such an interpretation should be something that even a "casual reader" can easily see, though this is debatable—particularly in light of some of the novel's more withering reviews, which either missed, glossed over, or underappreciated the novel's extended metaphor and commentary. As is the case with *Wild 90*, the novel's criticisms can be difficult to locate amidst the obscene language and disorienting narrative structure. This is why, in order to fully understand not just what Mailer is criticizing but how he goes about doing so (for the unique method and style of the book is its innovation) examining *Vietnam* alongside the similarly difficult and occasionally alienating *Wild 90* can prove enlightening.

Perhaps most significantly, in *Vietnam*, Mailer deploys a recursive self-reflexivity very similar to the kind he executes in *Wild 90*. In doing so, he achieves the same kind of ironic tone, which gives way to dual voices in the text. While in *Wild 90* Mailer was able to accomplish this through his own stylized and exaggerated acting style, in which he clearly drew attention to the tongue-in-cheek and self-referential nature of the film, in *Vietnam* he uses his narrator, D.J., to achieve a similar effect. As the character who might be most closely defined as the novel's protagonist, D.J. is nevertheless distinctly unreliable. Alternating between first-person narrated interludes and third-person narrated events of the hunting trip, he deliberately blurs the lines between "reality" and "fiction" as he recounts the series of events, prompting us to second guess his motives, his assertions, and even his identity. For example, after what he calls his "Intro Beep" at the beginning of the novel (meant to mimic a radio transmission), he says to the reader, "The fact of the matter is that you're up tight with a mystery, me, and this mystery can't be solved because I'm the center of it and I don't comprehend, not necessarily, I could be traducing myself."²⁴ The particular way he "traduces" himself is by suggesting that he might not, in fact, be D.J., a privileged young white man from Texas, but might instead be a black man in Harlem, narrating the tale through the jive-inflected

language of the hipster. “Maybe all of this humor here is absolute pretense,” he goes on to say. “Or maybe I’m a Spade and writing like a Shade.”²⁵ By prefacing the book in a way that invites the reader to be skeptical of the authority and identity of the narrator, Mailer also prompts us to ask how much of D.J.’s narrative is authentic and how much is rhetoric, exaggeration, or bombast. Much like Mailer’s Prince in *Wild 90*, D.J. is also aware of being watched, and delivers each of the lines here—and throughout the various “Intro Beeps” that subsequently break up the narrative—with a metaphorical “wink.” This highlights the self-reflexive aspect of D.J.’s own character, drawing attention to the stylized construction of his masculine hipster identity, which will permit us to see his subsequent portraits of masculinity similarly performative and problematic.

D.J.’s split identity is not the only example of the novel’s duality, particularly with regard to its ongoing interrogation of masculinity. Within many of D.J.’s own comments, we can find evidence of two voices: one voice performing a particular masculine identity and the other interrogating expectations for American masculinity. For example, consider his following soliloquy:

Hip hole and hupmobile, Braunschweiler, you didn’t invite Geiger and his counter for nothing, here is D.J. the friend Lee voice at your service—hold tight young America—introductions come. Let go of my dong, Shakespeare, I have gone too long, it is too late to tell my tale, may Batman tell it, let him declare there’s blood on my dick and D.J. Dicktore Doc Dick and Jek has got the bloods, and has done animal murder, out out damn fart, and murder of the soldierest sort, cold was my hand and hot.²⁶

The language of this passage might at first prove to obscure any underlying meaning within the narrative (as does the dialogue in *Wild 90*), as the phraseology initially reads more like babble than profundity.

It might also seem like mere braggadocio: for instance, D.J.’s candid reference to the fact that he has done “animal murder” and “murder of the soldierest sort” comes across in one sense as boastful, and it is notable that he chooses to introduce himself as a hunter and a soldier, positions that are clearly indicative of—perhaps even epitomizing—the hypermasculine. This is particularly evident in the sexualized language, the reference to “blood on my dick” suggesting rape or, more accurately, a metaphorical rape of the land in wartime. At the same time, however, this brief speech also criticizes such a definition of masculinity, as D.J.’s allusion to Macbeth (though laden with a comedic substitution of “out out damn fart” for “out out damn spot”) highlights the guilt and anxiety he feels in the aftermath of deploying this violence. It is “too late” for him to refigure his own masculine identity, though perhaps he can convey what he has learned about the problematic effects of a violent masculinity to his audience.

This kind of gendered self-interrogation also appears outside of D.J.’s various confessional interludes or “Intro Beeps.” For example, while on the hunting trip, D.J. himself seems to embrace, at least to an extent, the idea that deploying violence and “animal murder” will imbue him with a specifically masculine power. At one point, when he and Tex are watching two Grizzlies in the wild, D.J. says he’d “kiss LBJ on the petoons just to have a rifle to take down Griz 2 and see how he looks when he dies.”²⁷ In one sense, then, he recognizes the masculine power and respect such an act would confer upon him. Yet he—or his “opposite number in Harlem land,” depending on which of his alternate identities one considers “real”²⁸—is simultaneously very aware of the kind of masculine stereotype he is embracing. As he explains, this time from the third-person perspective, “D.J. suffers from one great American virtue, or maybe it’s a disease or ocular dysfunction—D.J. sees right through shit.”²⁹ Specifically, D.J. can see through the veneer of the hunting trip, straight



Figure 4.3 Mailer self-reflexive in *Wild 90* (1968). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

to what it is at its core: “ego status embroilments between members, guides, and executives.”³⁰ As D.J. also knows, everyone on the hunting trip, particularly Rusty, “has the sexual peculiarities of red-blooded men, which is to say that one of them can’t come unless he’s squinting down a gunsight, and the other won’t produce unless his wife sticks a pistol up his ass.”³¹ This blunt admission, which alludes to a widely accepted belief that manhood and virility are conferred by violence, draws attention to the absurdity of such ideas of manhood; they are “sexual peculiarities” that are largely arbitrary, as opposed to inherent traits of an emboldened masculinity.

Moreover, Rusty’s obsession with killing a bear (as opposed to a rabbit or a caribou, far less impressive prey) in order to prove his manhood is represented by D.J. as pathetic, as opposed to courageous or admirable. Without a bear, D.J. tells us, “Rusty and his status . . . can now take a double pine box funeral.”³² What Rusty fails to see in his preoccupation with the Grizzly is that there’s a “fucking nervous system running through the earth and air of this whole State of Alaska, and the bear is tuned in . . . and the air, man, the air is the medium and the medium is the message, that Alaska air is real message—it says don’t bullshit, buster.”³³ Rusty cannot comprehend a world that is larger than his petty aims, and compared to the natural world around him, he is entirely *unnatural*, his performance of manhood ultimately ringing untrue and inauthentic. He is all “bullshit,” concerned only with how he is perceived, lacking any connection to the intensity of what is around him. This, Mailer seems to suggest, is where American masculinity is headed, for Rusty is “corporation, right, that means he’s a voice.”³⁴

Even D.J., who “sees through shit,” succumbs to a limiting definition of American manhood. Though he is not “corporate” like his father, he still embraces the kind of destructive violence that has come to define America and the American man, as he too goes off to Vietnam and commits violence of the “soldierest sort.” Yet as Michael Glenday has previously noted, while such violence becomes the “profoundest self-expression” for all of the men, including D.J., “in no sense does Mailer condone the violence or the socio-political conditions producing it.”³⁵ The novel’s irony and self-reflexivity, expressed directly through D.J., lays the foundation for an assessment of aggressive masculine performance; with this in mind, it becomes evident that D.J.’s descriptions of Rusty and of himself (as he goes off to war with an anticipatory “Vietnam, hot damn”) imply that both men, despite their different ways of seeing, have bought into a “front.” Thus, as part of his own preoccupation with a certain existential notion of violent masculine identity, Mailer is courting uncertainty here, using D.J. to question whether there might be any idea of “true manhood” at all.³⁶ Such is also the case with the subtler but still central suggestion of the connection between violence and masculinity in *Wild 90*: the men’s obsession with weapons and physical aggression is clearly represented as a front or a guise, rather than some inherent part of authentic manhood; there too, Mailer is presenting violence as the “profoundest self-expression,” but is as skeptical and ironic and questioning of such a definition as he is in *Vietnam*.

Much like *Wild 90*, the setting of *Vietnam* further contributes to the novel’s interrogation of masculine performance. However, while in *Wild 90*, the confined setting of the small loft serves to highlight the limitations of the characters’ hyper-masculine behavior, acting as a metaphor for the way the men are trapped by their own posturing, in *Vietnam* it is the wide open space that draws attention to the limitations of such gendered performance. While for most of the narrative, D.J. and Tex are full of the kind of confidence that is often integral to definitions of masculinity, when they go out alone in the wilderness to camp, without weapons or gear, “awe and Dread is up on their back clawing away like a cat because they *alone*, man, you dig?”³⁷ When D.J. sees the “colors began to go from snow gold and yellow to rose and blue, coral in the folds of the ridges when the sun still hit, coral bright as the underside of the horn of the Dall ram,” he feels “full of beauty.”³⁸ Despite the somewhat pessimistic ending of the novel, which sees D.J. go off to Vietnam and presumably (if temporarily) embrace the identity of the aggressive masculine soldier, here he has a moment of clarity. He realizes what Rusty failed to realize: that the world is bigger than his gendered anxiety, and that his own need to prove his manhood in the wilderness seems petty and inauthentic when actually confronted with that wilderness.

This particular scene, and the descriptions of the Alaskan wild that are peppered throughout the novel, contrast sharply with much of the novel’s other obscenity-laced language, which many readers found offensive, off-putting, or simply unnecessary.³⁹ Yet it is important to note that the obscenity also serves a critical, interrogative function in both the novel and the film, though arguably, it is more effectively and masterfully done in the former (further evidence, I would suggest, of where Mailer’s best talent lies). When speaking of *Wild 90*, Mailer argued that the film’s obscenities “gave a beat to the sound, opened the actors to figures of speech—creativity is always next to the verboten—and opens all of us now to the opportunity of puzzling the subject a dangerous step further.”⁴⁰ It is helpful to apply this interpretation to the obscenity in *Vietnam*, for its abrasive language does ask us to “puzzle the subject” of masculinity and performance further than we might if presented with something less unsettling or transgressive; it is inherently tied to Mailer’s argument that real art should be “savage.”⁴¹ It not only contributes to the rhythm of the book, but, as Laura Adams has aptly noted, it is also “designed to set the reader’s teeth on edge, to jar him out of his complacency.”⁴²

This complacency, as many critics have noted, could apply to a number of things—Vietnam, corporate bureaucracy, or political corruption—and to this list I would also add gendered identity. In other words, Mailer is using obscenity to draw attention to and destabilize our notion of an “ideal” American masculinity. For example, consider D.J.’s first “Intro Beep,” wherein he referenced the “blood on his dick”: such a phrase is deliberately startling, but not merely present for shock value, since upon deeper analysis it reveals the anxiety over aggressive performances of manhood. In this way, it reflects the kind of dualism that has been exhibited throughout the novel, which allows Mailer and his characters to simultaneously perform and interrogate violent displays of masculinity; D.J. himself is expressing a kind of hipster masculinity by using obscenity, but that same language draws attention to the flawed notions of masculinity itself. The onslaught of profanity in *Wild 90* works in a similar fashion, functioning as an integral part of the characters’ masculine fronts while also calling attention to the falsity of such guises by the fact that it is so amplified as to come across as ridiculous rather than “real.”

It is also important to note that such obscenity also contributes to the dark, absurd humor of both the novel and the film.⁴³ This is not a humor that invites us to dismiss the language of the text as superficially shocking, but instead to see the text as always playing with tone, with meaning, and with “reality,” functioning as a kind of irony. Obscenity becomes an essential aspect of masculine performance in both narratives, but it is also part of what makes tough guys “laugh their heads off” at *Wild 90*, as they recognize the exaggerated version of the façade that masks the vulnerabilities of men. As Mailer would later say in *Armies of the Night*, “the noble common man was as obscene as an old goat, and his obscenity was what saved him. The sanity of said common democratic man was in his humor, and his humor was in his obscenity.”⁴⁴ In *Vietnam* and *Wild 90* this humorous obscenity has the potential to be a saving grace because it invites us to read (or listen) between the lines, prompting us to avoid the complacent conformity that Mailer believed contributed to the decay of American society. The uncomfortable laughter that arises from the obscenity allows us to see what is amusing, misguided, ironic, or aberrant about human behavior, and thus stimulates our critical faculties. The language pushes us to read in a way we might not otherwise; moreover, it pushes us to question norms—particularly those that define the parameters of masculine identity—rather than to simply accept them as infallible truths. Mailer believed constant questioning, argument, creativity, and critical thinking would save America; hence his remark that in obscenity there was “no villainy” but only “his love for America.”⁴⁵

In *City of Words* Tony Tanner argues that Mailer is perpetually negotiating between two worlds, and that his narrative voice often “calls into question its own theories” and “mocks its own metaphors.” Both *Wild 90* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* are intriguing reflections of Mailer’s preoccupation with this dialectic. What is particularly interesting about the duality of both of these narratives is that within them, despite his oft-repeated and passionate explanations of American masculinity, Mailer allows himself to explore the possibility that there might not be some inherent, authentic, tangible idea of manhood. Yet without understanding the self-aware humor of these works, it will be difficult to catch this self-interrogation—or to understand much of Mailer’s oeuvre. Eugene Kennedy recently shared a memory of Mailer that offers a useful way to think of the spirit of these two works. As Kennedy recalls, “After he finished reading an earlier biography of himself, Norman Mailer told me, with a mixture of rue and triumph, ‘He missed the twinkle.’”⁴⁶ If anything, these two narratives prove the value of catching Mailer’s “twinkle,” for by paying attention to the wry self-awareness, we can in turn see the deeper complexities of each work, for all of their perceived flaws.

Notes

- 1 Canby, Vincent (1968), "When Irish Eyes are Smiling, It's Norman Mailer," in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, J. Michael Lennon (ed.) Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1988: 141.
- 2 Mailer often made the most of the polarized responses to his work, using them as marketing material. In 1953, he published a combination of both negative and positive reviews of his novel *The Deer Park* on the book's dust cover, and used the same tactic on the posters advertising *Wild 90*.
- 3 Canby, Vincent (1968), "When Irish Eyes are Smiling, It's Norman Mailer," in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, J. Michael Lennon (ed.) Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1988: 141.
- 4 Oates, Joyce Carol (1974), *New Heaven, New Earth: The Visionary Experience in Literature*, New York: The Vanguard Press: 181.
- 5 Poirier, Richard (1972), *Norman Mailer*, New York: Viking Press: 153.
- 6 Hicks, Granville (1967), "Lark in the Race for the Presidency," in *Saturday Review*, September 16: 39–40.
- 7 In her *New York Times* review, for example, Adler claims that Mailer's remark that "tough guys" laugh at *Wild 90* while others sit in silence seems "consistent in questioning the manliness of those who dislike the movie," and Hicks argues that D.J. in *Vietnam* seems to have been "dreamed up in the interest of what [Mailer] considers good dirty fun" yet this, I would argue, overlooks Mailer's underlying and more serious commentary on manliness in the film and the book.
- 8 Mailer, Norman (1968), "Some Dirt in the Talk" in *The Mailer Review* (Fall 2009), Tampa, FL: University of South Florida Press: 454.
- 9 Cohen, Sarah Jo (2011) "Making Masculinity and Unmaking Jewishness: Mailer's Voice in *Wild 90* and *Beyond the Law*," in *The Mailer Review* Vol. 5 No. 1, Tampa, FL: University of South Florida Press: 188.
- 10 Cohen, Sarah Jo (2011) "Making Masculinity and Unmaking Jewishness: Mailer's Voice in *Wild 90* and *Beyond the Law*," in *The Mailer Review* Vol. 5 No. 1, Tampa, FL: University of South Florida Press: 188.
- 11 As Joyce Carol Oates has noted along these lines, "Norman Mailer's efforts to dramatize the terror of the disintegrating identity have largely been mistaken as self-display" (179).
- 12 Canby, Vincent (1968), "When Irish Eyes are Smiling, It's Norman Mailer," in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, J. Michael Lennon (ed.) Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1988: 144.
- 13 Adler, Renata (1968), "The Screen: Norman Mailer's Mailer," in *New York Times*, January 8: 33.
- 14 Fulford, Bob (1968), "Mailer, McLuhan, and Muggeridge: On Obscenity," in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, J. Michael Lennon (ed.) Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1988: 128.
- 15 Mailer, Norman (1968), "Some Dirt in the Talk," in *The Mailer Review* (Fall 2009), Tampa, FL: University of South Florida Press: 447–8.
- 16 Mailer, Norman (1968), "Some Dirt in the Talk," in *The Mailer Review* (Fall 2009), Tampa, FL: University of South Florida Press: 448.
- 17 Mailer, Norman (1966), *Cannibals & Christians*, New York: The Dial Press: 242.
- 18 Mailer, Norman (1968), "Some Dirt in the Talk," in *The Mailer Review* (Fall 2009), Tampa, FL: University of South Florida Press: 453.
- 19 Mailer, Norman (1968), "Some Dirt in the Talk," in *The Mailer Review* (Fall 2009), Tampa, FL: University of South Florida Press: 464.
- 20 Mailer, Norman (1968), "Some Dirt in the Talk," in *The Mailer Review* (Fall 2009), Tampa, FL: University of South Florida Press: 451.
- 21 Mailer, Norman (2015), *The Selected Letters of Norman Mailer*, J. Michael Lennon (ed.), New York: Random House: 370.
- 22 Fulgham, Richard Lee (2008), "The Wise Blood of Norman Mailer: An Interpretation and Defense of *Why Are We in Vietnam?*" in *The Mailer Review* Vol. 2, Fall: Tampa, FL: University of South Florida Press: 338.

- 23 Fulgham, Richard Lee (2008), "The Wise Blood of Norman Mailer: An Interpretation and Defense of *Why Are We in Vietnam?*" in *The Mailer Review* Vol. 2, Fall: Tampa, FL: University of South Florida Press: 341. This is not to downplay previous argument that the novel is, as Nigel Leigh argues, a commentary on the "cultural plague" in America (Nigel Leigh, 1990, *Radical Fictions and Novels of Norman Mailer*, London: Palgrave Macmillan: 24), or, as Robert Solotaroff argues, that it explores the sense of entrapment one feels at having to choose between the "two diseased species" in America: a Vietnam War-embracing, primal "cannibal" or a corporate, bureaucratic "Christian" (Robert Solotaroff, 1974, *Down Mailer's Way*, 1st edition, Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press: 200). The subject of American masculinity is in itself part and parcel of these larger concerns. Additionally, he notes that "Mailer implies and perhaps confesses that there is nothing civilized about violence . . . as long as we justify our blood lust and hunger for sexual dominancy, we are not civilized men, but baboons and hyenas and wolves" (Fulgham, 2008: 343).
- 24 Mailer, Norman (1967), *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 23.
- 25 Mailer, Norman (1967), *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 26. The narrator continues to vacillate between identifying himself as D.J. and as a Harlem "Spade." In "Intro Beep Four," for instance, he asks, "Am I the ideational heat of a real crazy-ass broken-legged Harlem Spade, and just think myself D.J. white boy genius Texan in Alaska imagining my opposite number in Harlem land, when in fact I, D.J., am trapped in a Harlem head which has gone so crazy that I think I sitting at a banquet in the Dallas ass white-ass manse remembering Alaska . . . ?" (57–8).
- 26 Mailer, Norman (1967), *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 7, 193.
- 27 Mailer, Norman (1967), *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 58.
- 28 Mailer, Norman (1967), *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 49.
- 29 Mailer, Norman (1967), *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 49.
- 30 Mailer, Norman (1967), *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 49.
- 31 Mailer, Norman (1967), *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 12.
- 32 Mailer, Norman (1967), *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 55. As D.J. also notes, "Rusty was sick. He had to get it up. They had to go for grizzer now. Well, he was man enough to steel his guts before necessity, he not D.J.'s father for naught" (106). In his own reading of the novel, Barry Leeds argues that this passage "seems not so much a tendency to omniscience as a capacity to identify with his father's plight," but I would argue that D.J. is much more critical than this (*The Structured Vision of Norman Mailer*, New York: New York University Press, 1969: 184).
- 33 Mailer, Norman (1967), *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 54.
- 34 Mailer, Norman (1967), *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 51.
- 35 Glenday, Michael K. (1995), *Norman Mailer (Modern Novelists)*, New York: St. Martin's Press: 109.
- 36 From the beginning of his writing career, Mailer sustained an ongoing dialogue with his readers—and himself—about the role of violence in constructions of manhood. In "A Calculus to Heaven," a story he wrote as a senior at Harvard that was later published in *Advertisements for Myself*, one of Mailer's military heroes believes that "life and death and violent action were fundamentals, and he would find no lie there" (*Advertisements*: 51). Later, in "The White Negro," he frames violence as an essential part of Hip masculinity. In a 1964 interview, Mailer also argues that individual violence is an essential response to the "extinction of possibilities," and claims that those who understand this can experience not only liberation, but also revelation (Norman Mailer 1982, *Pieces*, 1st edition, London: Little & Brown: 28). Yet Mailer also insists that he disapproves of "inhuman violence—violence which is on a large scale and abstract" (Norman Mailer, 1963, *The Presidential Papers*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 136), and in works like *An American Dream* and *Why Are We in Vietnam?* he examines the negative consequences of misguided violence, particularly as a characteristic of masculinity.
- 37 Mailer, Norman (1967), *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 197.
- 38 Mailer, Norman (1967), *Why Are We in Vietnam?*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 196.
- 39 *TIME* called it "a wildly turgid monologhorrhea," ("Hot Damn" on September 8, 1967) for example. Interestingly, even Mailer claimed he "hate[d] to add all that obscenity" but had to include it because it

"is the only metaphor to express the situation that produces Vietnam" ("Anything Goes," *Newsweek*, November 13, 1967: 76).

- 40 Mailer, Norman (1968), "Some Dirt in the Talk" in *The Mailer Review* (Fall 2009), Tampa, FL: University of South Florida Press: 469.
- 41 Mailer, Norman (1968), "Some Dirt in the Talk" in *The Mailer Review* (Fall 2009), Tampa, FL: University of South Florida Press: 471.
- 42 Adams, Laura (1976), *Existential Battles: The Growth of Norman Mailer*, Athens, Ohio: University of Ohio Press: 120. Other critics have pointed to the significant function of the novel's obscenity: Robert Begiebing argues that the obscenity is "satirically directed" (Robert Begiebing, 1981, *Acts of Regeneration*, Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press: 92), and Nigel Leigh argues that "obscenity keeps consciousness dialectical, and his cool narrative blends highbrow philosophical concerns with their opposite to produce synergy" (*Radical Fictions*: 129). Andrew Wilson recognizes the obscenity to be a political act, calling it "critical and celebrative of national life, a metaphorical substitute for profane violence, and a testament to American freedom and liberty" (Andrew Wilson, 2008, *Norman Mailer: An American Aesthetic*, 1st edition, New York: Peter Lang AG, Internationaler Verlag der Wissenschaften: 90).
- 43 While critical commentary on the function (or presence) of comedy in *Wild 90* is sparse, a number of critics have noted the comedic elements of *Vietnam*. Mike McGrady calls the book a "lunatic comedy" (Norman Mailer, *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, 1st edition, edited by J. Michael Lennon, Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi: 112, 106.), Eliot Freemont-Smith calls it "funny, but in the grimmest, dead-serious way," (*New York Times*, September 8, 1967: 33) and Mailer himself says, "There are times when I read *Why Are We in Vietnam?* and it displeases me too, but there are other times when I decide it's one of the 10 funniest books written since *Huckleberry Finn*" (*Conversations*: 106).
- 44 Mailer, Norman (1968), *Armies of the Night*, New York: Signet: 61.
- 45 Mailer, Norman (1968), *Armies of the Night*, New York: Signet: 60.
- 46 Kennedy, Eugene (2014), "Pulling No Punches" in *America Magazine*, Vol. 210, No. 14, April 21. Available online: <http://www.americamagazine.org/issue/culture/pulling-no-punches> (accessed: January 26, 2015).

5

TRANSCENDING THE FORMULA: *BEYOND THE LAW* AND THE OLD-FASHIONED COP MOVIE

Kenneth Jurkiewicz

What I was trying to do in *Beyond the Law* was to create the reality, if you will, below the reality, beneath the reality, within the reality of an evening in a police station. I think that cops and criminals are incredible people. No one's ever begun to deal with how fantastic they are in their love-hate relation. It's like the relation between two linemen in professional football. What goes on between them in the course of a game is closer than a marriage. They know each other in ways that are incommunicable.

NORMAN MAILER¹

These ambiguities are handled with much more conviction, variety, and restraint in *Beyond the Law* (1968) than what had proved to be the case with Mailer's stultifying one-track treatment of the paranoiac frustrations of three besieged and besotted small-time hoods. There are many reasons for the second film's decided improvements in characterization, pacing, and thematic development, but none of them was due to the fact that Mailer learned a few things from the negative reviews of *Wild 90: Beyond the Law* was shot and initially edited during the period between the production of *Wild 90* and its commercial release.

In a radical departure from the aborted gangster-movie melodramatics of his first film, Mailer successfully infused new life into a bunch of tired and overly familiar police-movie stereotypes: the garrulous and obsessive Irish police detective, his patient and long-suffering wife, the seedy and tainted vice-squad cops, the hardened, sarcastic police sergeant, the no-nonsense District Attorney, the giddy, dumb-broad prostitutes, and the usual grimy assortment of crooks, bums, weirdos, and crazies who have inhabited the dingy backrooms of big-city police precincts in countless grade-B detective movies.

Mailer managed to make their interrelationships interesting and highly entertaining by allowing his actors to extemporize on many of his favorite literary concepts: the psychopathic hipster as existential hero; the seemingly insignificant and therefore even more insidious backroom origins of home-grown, bully-boy totalitarianism; moral growth and self-definition through destructive violations of conventional morality; and the bittersweet assaults on the ego when one's loving trust in another is manipulated and betrayed. All of these ideas are bandied about with considerable wit and lower-depths élan by the often inspired members of Mailer's improvisational ensemble,

recruited as usual from his eclectic entourage of friends, relatives, and New York literati. Mailer himself for once gives a creditable performance, since his aesthetically suicidal urge for unbridled self-indulgence is properly channeled this time around, reflecting as it does an aspect of his character's personality which the audience is actually meant to regard as unadmirably pompous. Even more fortunate is Mailer's choice of a setting—a New York City police precinct where the detectives interrogate and otherwise work over a typical evening's roundup of criminal suspects—since in a very real sense it defines the film's structure.

We get to see what we expect to see in such a setting: the initial line-up, in which the precinct's top-dog, Lieutenant Francis Xavier Pope (played by Mailer, of course), gets to eyeball and otherwise size up each alleged miscreant; the revealing battle of wills between suspects and their interrogators; and the after-hours liaisons between three of the detectives and the various women currently in their lives. There is plenty of room for improvisation within that loose framework, but the fairly rigid routine of a police detective's normal workday schedule—which would, after all, have to be depicted in a relatively straightforward fashion in a pseudo-documentary set in a police station—precludes that kind of aesthetic form lessens which had turned out so disastrously in Mailer's claustrophobic gangster film.

The police-precinct milieu also provided, as Mailer put it, "an atmosphere, some pervasive atmosphere, in which his untried actors would arrive at a working mood."² Arriving at such a mood in the presence of three (and sometimes four) camera crews was not as difficult as it might at first appear, since most of the performances by Mailer's squad of professionals and amateurs are uniformly convincing and rarely dilettantish. The good acting may indeed be another bonus of the precinct setting, which would enforce its own inhibiting discipline on the improvising actors, as Mailer explained in "A Course in Film-making":

The need . . . was to have a scheme which would keep the improvisation from flowing over into a purge. Some constraint had to be found for each scene; ideally, an overlying constraint had to be found for the entire film. In *Beyond the Law*, the problem seemed to solve itself. Being a policeman or suspect arrested for the night was apparently one of the formal, even primeval scenes of the unconscious. None of his actors had trouble believing they were either policeman or under arrest, indeed his actors were richer in the conception of their role than the author would have been if he had written it for them. Nor had his presence as a director even been necessary in every scene.³

As the above quotation demonstrates, in discussing *Beyond the Law* Mailer tends to deprecate his own contribution to the film's success: he told Joseph Gelmis, "I didn't conceive it. I didn't dominate it. This wasn't my plaything. What happened was these friends of mine suddenly absolutely amazed the hell out of me." Yet despite such expressions of gratified amazement and the vigorous denials about the extent of Mailer's own participation in the making of his one good film, we should not neglect either the truly collaborative nature of this group endeavor or Mailer's place in it as prime mover and orchestrator, as Laura Adams reminded us:

Because there is no script, the actors seem to come closer to the edge of subconscious revelation than in conventional drama; the actors are authors as well. Mailer keeps fairly tight rein on the film's structure, giving the actors enough latitude to unearth some real drama in the conflicts between victims and police, yet retaining the necessary threads of continuity.⁴

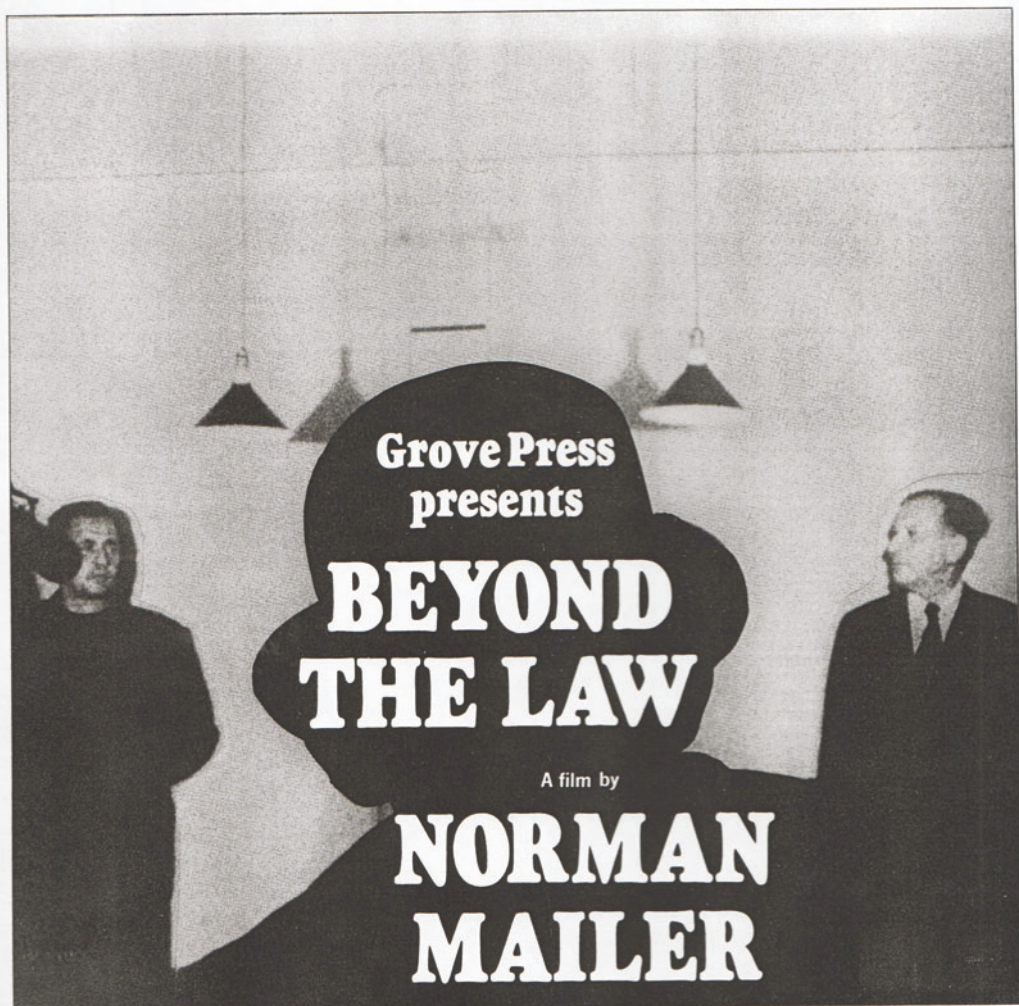
One of the ways in which Mailer firmly held on to those necessary story line threads is by his often adroit juggling of the extemporized narrative set pieces provided for him by his enterprising cast. The film begins with two vice-squad detectives, Mickey Berk and Rocco Gibraltar (Mickey Knox and Buzz Farbar) going to a restaurant to meet their blind dates: as an opening conversational icebreaker, Rocco asks a bemused Marcia Stillwell (Marsha Mason), “Is that your real name? . . . I mean, Rocco Gibraltar is obviously a real name, but Marcia Stillwell? It sounds too—euphonious.” At dinner, they relate to the attractive, but slightly apprehensive, two women and the night’s events at their precinct, which we get to see in a series of flashbacks. Our introduction to the morally ambiguous world of police–criminal interaction is reassuring in the sarcastic confidence of the laconic policemen and the morose sullenness of the deadbeat suspects. Thus, with mocking deference and pronounced formality, the beefy, crew-cutted Sergeant Finley instructs his transient charges of the proper decorum expected of them at the ensuing precinct lineup:

Let me introduce myself. I am Sergeant Finley. I am your host for the evening. If you all behave and pay attention to my instructions, there will be no difficulty. If you do not wish to behave, it will be my privilege to knock you down and step on your face. . . . Now everybody *shaddup*, think about what you have done, and behave yourself.

The sole purpose of the lineup seems to be to offer the precinct’s toughest cop, Lieutenant Pope, an early opportunity to browbeat and humiliate each suspect: “I’ll tell you what we’ve got you in here for,” Pope snaps at a thoroughly intimidated yet superficially different suspect. “We’ve got you in here for something very surprising—rape. You’re very pretty. Why does a pretty fellow like you have to go to rape?” After the initial session of pointless harassment, the lieutenant deploys his forces and the individual interrogations begin. What is particularly interesting about Mailer’s use of improvisation in this film is how readily the cinematic environment created by the chaotic conditions of filming builds up and sustains the situations in which the actors find themselves within the evolving fictional context, as Mailer soon discovered:

He had filmed most of *Beyond the Law* on an unrented floor in a seedy office building. It was perfect for giving the sensation that one was upstairs at a police station. Since he had set up interrogations between his detectives and suspects in separate rooms, three camera teams worked apart from one another in the different interrogation chambers. As in a police station, detectives came in and out, questioned a man, took off. Other detectives came in. After a period of filming, the floor of the office building might as well have become a police station. There was a babble of sounds throughout, prisoners were arguing, weeping, protesting, going silent, detectives were bellowing or intoning charges, sounds of a beating in one room were agitating an unstable prisoner in another. Half the movie had been filmed in two nights, filmed on a sea of sound and cinematic sensations.⁵

For this apparently untypical night—and under the watchful eye of an assistant district attorney who is expressly and pointedly present to observe the evening’s proceedings in order to insure that nobody’s civil rights are being violated at that apparently complaint-ridden precinct—Mailer’s cops confront and get to question just about every major type of social deviant that could be dredged up in a large city: a man who killed his wife with an axe (“I asked him [the hardware store clerk] for an axe. Something I can hold in my hand”); an ex-con imprisoned for rape and now accused of another (“You just asked her how to get back to Manhattan,” an incredulous Sergeant Finley asks



Produced by Buzz Farbar and Norman Mailer/Directed by Norman Mailer/Photographed by D. A. Pennebaker, Nicholas Proferes, Jan Welt/With Norman Mailer, Rip Torn, George Plimpton, Buzz Farbar, Beverly Bentley, Mickey Knox, Mary Lynn, Marcia Mason, Jack Richardson, Michael McClure, Jose Torres, Lee Roscoe, Tom Baker, John Maloon, Joe Shaw, Edward Bonnett.

"Good and tough and entertaining! A movie of faces, black, white and brown, all touched by real life, fearful intimacy." —*Vincent Canby, The New York Times*

"A cockeyed marvel, a brutal, hilarious chunk of imaginative improvisation." —*Joseph Gelmis, Newsday*

"The Mighty Mailer Players make the fuzz fly in a mythical Manhattan police station. A chilling translation of law and order into corruption and clubs." —*Joseph Morgenstern, Newsweek*

"It has guts, humor, pathos and talent!" —*William Wolf, Cue*

Figure 5.1 Poster art for Norman Mailer's *Beyond the Law* (1968). Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

the mild-mannered and amiable convicted rapist, "and she started screaming?"); a small-time gambler who is the Mafia front-man for a floating crap game operation; a husband-and-wife pornography team held with several prostitutes on a "Whipping Club" charge (when the husband gives his name as Perry Fuchs, Berk comments, "That's a nice American name"); a respectable-

looking fellow caught soliciting in a subway men's room; an accused child molester; and even a few ordinary thieves and armed robbers.

Mailer intercuts from one interrogation scene to others occurring simultaneously, ironically juxtaposing the conduct of the probably innocent with the obviously guilty, and the strong-willed resisters of all police pressure with those who need no coercion to break down and confess immediately. In the former category must be placed the subway solicitor (Peter Rusoff, in a cool and forceful performance), who angrily knocks a paper cup out of Pope's hand after Pope had deliberately and repeatedly flicked orange drink in the suspect's face: "Don't flick drink in my face. Don't flick any goddamn thing on me to diminish my dignity." Rusoff has his character remain unflustered and in control of his situation throughout the entire ordeal, challenging his tormentors every step of the way. As Laura Adams declared, "Effrontery seems to be the chief means of defense by any suspect against the fascistic methods of the police,"⁶ and Mailer and his troops get more effrontery than they are accustomed to from the feisty Rusoff:

Somebody was sitting or standing just beside me and suddenly I knew nothing except that some little minion of the law just put his hand on me and said you're under arrest—which is, I think, a pretty wild kind of situation. And I don't know how the hell these things are done, but this seems to be a kind of mechanism which is probably a part of the whole goddamn police system in this town.

The axe-murderer, on the other hand, is the one who most easily capitulates, although his dignity seems to have been defined for him by his murderous act: in between crying jags he blurts out to the pensive detectives surrounding him at the beginning of his interrogation that he's really not confessing, but still wants to admit that he killed her "because I wanted to find out who I was," thus making him a most unlikely spiritual heir to Mailer's fictional alter-ego, Stephen Rojack, the super-macho hero of *An American Dream*, who also killed his wife for existential reasons. Before strangling her, Rojack reflected on the relationship between marriage, murder, and identity in terms which could be directly applicable to this pathetic situation: "I hated her, yes indeed I did, but my hatred was a cage which wired my love, and I did not know if I had the force to find my way free. Marriage to her was the armature of my ego; remove the armature and I might topple like clay."⁷

Although the film's axe-murderer made more than a dent in his ego's armature, he still toppled like clay in front of the cops, a tempting denouement which Rojack managed to avoid. But, on Mailer's *terra*, at least the wife-killer in *Beyond the Law* attempted to create meaning for himself by destructively exercising his freedom, no mean feat for a dispirited, hunch-shouldered, wiry, and meek Korean War veteran subsisting on disability pay.

Mailer tensely hovers over him with a look of fascinated anticipation mingled with bemused sympathy as he pours out his disjointed and tearful, yet also strangely assertive and proud, declaration of guilt. It is the film's most oddly affecting moment, and poet Edward Bonetti plays the part of the murderer with a touching natural poignancy that is completely devoid of hammy sentimentality.

With the subsequent arrival of Popcorn and Grah, two motorcyclists picked up on a hit-and-run homicide, we get depicted for us more suitably dynamic embodiments of Mailer's hipster-hero, the "frontierism in the Wild West of American night life,"⁸ as Mailer described him in "The White Negro": The existential hipster seeks to achieve moral growth by courageously tapping into and acting upon his most basic instinctual urges, thus becoming "a philosophical psychopath . . . interested not only in the dangerous imperatives of his psychopathy but in codifying, at least for himself, the suppositions on which his inner universe is constructed."⁹

Rocco: Are you a person by yourself?

Popcorn: You seen me.

The laid-back and malevolently wide-eyed Popcorn, played by Rip Torn in what the *Variety* reviewer called “the performance of his life,”¹⁰ is indeed a person by himself, as is his younger comrade, for philosophical reasons that they themselves are unable to articulate very well: both are stoned out of their twisted minds when they burst into the station, pounding doors, throwing things around, and pushing people into walls. Mailer, however, could express the basic attitudes of the hipster and the psychopath more clearly in “The White Negro”:

[T]he nihilism of Hip proposes as its final tendency that every social restraint and category be removed, and the affirmation implicit in the proposal is that man would then prove to be more creative than murderous and so would not destroy himself . . . Hip, which would return us to ourselves, at no matter what price in individual violence, is the affirmation of the barbarian, for it requires a primitive passion about human nature to believe that individual acts of violence are always to be preferred to the collective violence of the State; it takes literal faith in the creative possibilities of the human being to envisage acts of violence as the catharsis which prepares growth.¹¹

As representatives of the collective violence of the State, the cops make natural targets for the release of these two late-model Hipsters’ combined vengeful fury. Popcorn and Gahr aren’t in the station for more than twenty minutes of screen time before they unsuccessfully try to bust out—the handcuffed Popcorn somehow getting a hold of a detective’s gun—which results in a free-for-all with “actors” bodies finally locked on the floor like a heap of twist-roll pretzels.”¹² The *cinéma vérité* style photography, by the way, is at its best in this sequence, since the eruption into violence begins so quickly and surprisingly that the technical crews end up jostling themselves and getting in the way of the participants in order to get clear views of the action. The audience is left with the impression that the fighting was just as unexpected for the cameramen as it was for the actors playing the cops, which sustains of course the hoped-for and sought-after illusion of documentary-like spontaneity.

Torn is indeed appropriately demonic as the dangerously distant Popcorn. His psychopathic instability is reflected not only in his scraggly-bearded unkempt appearance and scruffy cyclist regalia but also in his slyly peek-a-boo arrogance and hip, contemptuous detachment:

Rocco: You are a freak-ass and a shit.

Popcorn: I was walkin’ one day in a free and easy way, telling me I’m sure I’ve got a secret, feelin’ real fine, nothin’ buggin’ my mind. When here comes the heat, with a pair of flattened feet, askin’ me my name, and why I look so game, and what not. And I’m up against the wall, with his finger on the craw, givin’ me my favorite of all the treatment.

Pauline Kael’s precise description of Torn’s manic performance as the flamboyantly dissipated country singer in *Payday* (1973) could also be used to characterize his work in *Beyond the Law*: “Torn projects the magnetism of unstable personalities . . . He can do split-second seizures of rage and pain, and he can flip in an instant from his usual nakedly appraising look to a fiend-pixie smile that is so broad it’s hardly human.”¹³



Figure 5.2 Norman Mailer as Pope in *Beyond the Law* (1968). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

Michael McClure's Grahnr reveals a more openly volatile and bombastic facet of the Hipster-psychopathic sensibility. With his snorting and fidgeting and tortured heavy-breathing and his drug-induced torrent of scatological abuse—McClure is, after all, the playwright whose "gutter language in *The Beard* . . . acted like a wire brush on some of our pretenses," as Stanley Kauffmann put it¹⁴—Grahnr comes, across as a slightly less complicated lower-class prototype of Mailer's equally indelicate D.J., who made his appearance in *Why Are We In Vietnam?* a few months before the film was produced. Even though it is clear that Pope understands, along with Mailer, that "the psychopath becomes an embodiment of the extreme contradictions of the society which formed his character,"¹⁵ it becomes obvious that something has gone even more radically wrong inside Grahnr's criminal head which Pope in particular finds especially fascinating. After the two Hell's Angel-types are subdued in the brawl, Grahnr's obscene, fragmented fulminations increase in intensity and unintelligible frustration until he screams out very clearly that if he is not allowed to contact his lawyer, "I'm gonna shit on God's asshole."

With this verbal desecration, Grahnr proves himself to be a Norman Mailer aficionado, since what he is doing is garbling the same spirit-as-God's-excrement metaphysical theory which Mailer first propounded in "The Metaphysics of the Belly," developed further in "The Political Economy of Time," and would illustrate at great length in *Why Are We In Vietnam?* Grahnr, in other words, comes to the same intuitive awareness, as does D.J., of the excremental source of his liberating nihilistic power, an awareness from which they both finally could not distance themselves. This philosophical detachment is necessary for the Hipster if he is to avoid lapsing into random, purposeless psychopathy, as Mailer explained in "The White Negro":

[T]he hipster is a psychopath, and yet not a psychopath but the negation of the psychopath, for he possesses the narcissistic detachment of the philosopher, that absorption in the recessive nuances of one's own motive which is so alien to the unreasoning drive of the psychopath. In this country where new millions of psychopaths are developed each year, stamped with the mint of our contradictory popular culture (where sex is sin and yet sex is paradise), it is as if there has been room already for the development of the antithetical psychopath who extrapolates from his own condition, from the inner certainty that his rebellion is just, a radical vision of the universe which thus separates him from the general ignorance, reactionary prejudice, and self-doubt of the more conventional psychopath. Having converted his unconscious experience into much conscious knowledge, the hipster has shifted the focus of his desire from immediate gratification toward that wider passion for future power which is the mark of civilized man. Yet with an irreducible difference. For Hip is the sophistication of the wise primitive in a giant jungle, and so its appeal is still beyond the civilized man.¹⁶

Grahr is the psychopath and Popcorn is clearly the quintessential Hipster. While Grahr can do nothing but rave on incoherently after he has dropped his Mailerian blasphemous threat, Popcorn can sardonically defend his buddy's scatological sacrilege by telling Pope, "If it was good enough for Martin Luther, it's good enough for him." Popcorn's witticism, however, does not placate Pope, who sternly and heatedly lectures Popcorn on the origins of his friend's (pun intended) deep-seated destructive drive: "Your friend has two concepts in his brain . . . God and asshole are the essence of criminality. You mix the two [and it] is the beginning of all evil."

Mailer-Pope is attracted to Grahr's excremental nihilism because he feels a very strong bond of philosophical and personal empathy for the downtrodden miscreants whom he and his fellow cops nevertheless cheerfully mistreat, as Pope himself explains to his wife late in the film when she asks him for a divorce because he never has time for any home life. Try as he might, he acknowledges to her in a pseudo-Irish brogue that has gotten progressively thicker during the second half of the film, he can neither enjoy a normal family life nor can he be won over to a genuinely charitable or socially constructive sympathy for the morally warped misfits he is drawn to, simply because he is too much like them himself:

I'm the cop who loves criminals. . . . I have this theory of the universe. . . . What I've got going for me is very simple, very simple. I know the need of the Lord. He says to Himself, "My poor criminals"—the Lord. He's always weepin' for his criminals, 'cause He's Jeezus Christ—can't there be one cop who's got a fucking bit of sense in his brain? Let there be a little blood and tear for the crook, the poor city crook, who gets his ear smashed right into the bone of his brain. Uh-hmm. Uh-hmm. And I says, "I'm there, Lord." And He says, "No, you're too dirty, rotten, stupid, yellow—and besides that, you're a lay-tent homosexual."

No matter, then, how idealistic he may have been when he first began his police career, the intelligent cop who is honest with himself sooner or later begins to realize that the secret and intimate rapport which seems to inevitably develop between policeman and suspect is based on a similar alienated lifestyle, a similar distorted world-view, a similar maladjusted way of doing things which cuts them both off from normal social intercourse. Gibraltar also reticulates this same point—minus Mailer's stage-Irish theatricality and murky sexual implications—at the beginning of the film when his date asks him, "Whatever in the world possessed you to become a policeman?" After fumbling around a bit—"We sort of keep order," he initially replies, which is as succinct a declaration of the film's theme as

one is likely to find—Rocco half-seriously gets down to cases: “Well, it was either become a policeman or, uh, become a, uh, criminal. I was beating up people anyway. I thought I might, uh, well, beat ’em up and get, you know, on the right side of the law.” In a scene near the end of the film, Pope readily concurs with Gibraltar’s self-evaluation and links Rocco’s hangups with his own anti-social tendencies: “You’re a dirty fellow with excellent qualities. The police force depends on a judicious mixture of the clean and the filthy. Without that, you’re as dispensable as me.” From that perspective, then, the criminal might be viewed as an injudicious mixture of the same opposing properties, with the difference between the pursuers and the pursued merely a matter of pedigree and not of kind.

In Mailer’s precinct, however, the already hazy line between full-fledged criminality and the sometimes ambiguous means by which the police attempt to fulfill the State’s essential function of preserving lawful order seems at times to have dissolved entirely. By the time we are half-way through the film, it has gotten to the absurd point where the cops deliberately start breaking laws while the crooks demand that they be rigidly enforced. All of the suspects being grilled by Mailer’s crew—including the weak-willed axe-murderer who jumped at the chance to confess—are continually demanding to see their lawyers, yet each time they quite properly start demanding their constitutional rights, the cops either contemptuously ignore their appeals or lie and tell them that their counsels have been contacted and are on their way:

Rocco: What about your lawyer? Do you know where I have your lawyer? Up my ass, that’s where I’ve got your lawyer.

Perry Fuchs: You don’t know the law, do you?



Figure 5.3 Poet Michael McClure plays the biker role of Grahr in Norman Mailer’s *Beyond the Law* (1968). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

Despite the presence of an assistant district attorney who is supposed to function as a legal watchdog-observer of this precinct's interrogational tactics, and despite Pope's implicitly hypocritical admonition to one detective that "Every time you work someone over needlessly, it disturbs something in the shape of things," we get to witness (or at least overhear) a couple of off-camera beatings and several grotesque examples of psychological mistreatment, the worst of which is Pope's sadistic baiting of a frightened and obviously framed 63-year-old black man who is accused of molesting an eight-year-old girl; "The problem with you is that you're nearsighted," Pope informs the unlucky fellow (Pope, always on the lookout for the weakest point in a prisoner's psychological defenses, suddenly adapts a Southern redneck drawl). "You can't tell young pussy from old pussy. You can't tell eight pussy from twenty-five pussy." At this point, even the deliberately restrained DA (played by Noel Parmentel Jr., the film-maker and right-wing polemicist) has had enough:

Asst. DA: I've been watching your performance all evening. You've got the reputation of being this poor cop. That detective story shit is okay with me. That's your own affair. But it's a big goddamn lot of crap to me. The man has been bum rapped—he's been plain bum rapped—and that's the facts as we see it. We will do nothing further.

Pope: Oh, I have no quarrel with that. But as a bum rap, I can only point out to you that it was the district attorney's order that brought him here in the first place. You bring these people here and you make us work with them and then you tell us that it was a bum rap. Very well. All right. Excellent.

Although he has to somewhat sheepishly back down from this particular representative of lower-echelon city officialdom, Pope is far more successful in his unscheduled encounter with an even higher urban authority-figure—the Mayor himself. Immediately after Popcorn and Gahr's painful escape attempt, and while precinct personnel are still nursing their bruises, a high-strung mayoral aide comes scurrying into the station to announce that his boss is about to visit the precinct on one of his highly visible walking tours.

A few moments later, a beaming George Plimpton, whose mannerisms and speech patterns come across for this performance as a most unappealing combination of the worst characteristics of John Lindsay and JFK, comes strutting in, glad-handing everybody and exuding an inane nervous confidence and oily charm just by the way he fitfully moves around in highly mannered spurts, as he leans forward with precarious stiffness and pretends to listen attentively to all the innocuous answers to his naive and bland questions. Plimpton's Mayor is the archetypal knee-jerk liberal, filled with the best of abstract intentions yet totally divorced from the grim realities of his ungovernable city: "He's a fine fellow," Pope later comments to his wife. "He's a nice, sweet, innocent fellow and I could have shot him where he stood." The first thing that the Mayor wants to know is what sort of toilet facilities are available to the prisoners. "We're not running a hotel here," replies an already patient Pope, "but I can assure you we're not running a concentration camp either." After requesting that Pope "bring out a member of a minority group" so that he could be questioned on the extent of police brutality he has experienced or witnessed in this precinct, the Mayor is invited to visit any interrogation room and talk with anybody he wants.

The Mayor complies and walks into a situation for which even his Ivy League aplomb cannot provide an adequate defense. The resulting improvised repartee is worthy of Abbott & Costello at

their inspired best in terms of satirically nuanced cross-talk and the well-timed delivery of authority-deflation non-sequiturs. It is so amusing and well-executed an example of Mailer's improvisational approach that the entire sequence is worth recording here:

Mayor: *(walks into interrogation room and sees a very haggard-looking young man with piercing, wary eyes squatting in the corner)* What's this in here?

Pope: Your honor, this young fellow was brought—what are you in for? What are you—let's see your—

Finley: Stand up. Stand up.

Pope: Stand up for his honor.

Finley: Stand up!

Mayor: No, no.

Finley: He's the Mayor.

Mayor: No, that's alright. You just sit right on down there where you were. Sit down!

Finley: Well, do as his honor tells you.

Mayor: Yeah, sit down. Sit down. It's much better if you sit down, I think. He doesn't look as pinched. Yeah, that's better. I don't—I'm the Mayor, uh, as you know, I suppose, from the lieutenant here?

Irish: Mayor? Mayor who?

Mayor: Mayor of the?

Pope: Mayor of the city. He's the mayor of the city.

Mayor: Now, uh—

Irish: Mayor of the city?

Pope: Now, uh, anybody's mistreated you?

Irish: Yeah.

Pope: Yeah?

Irish: A lot of people.

Pope: The whole world, huh?

Irish: The whole world, yeah.

Mayor: No, no, let's be more explicit than that. You said someone's been mistreating you—in, uh, what sense? Are you having—how about the police officers you've been brought—

Irish: Yeah!

Mayor: What have they done to you that makes you feel you've been mistreated?

Pope: Have any police officers mistreated you?

Irish: Yes, yes!

Mayor: In what way? Now, I'm the Mayor. I—I'm the person in control of this city. You can speak absolutely freely. You can tell me just what you think you've—

Irish: Well, I wasn't allowed to call anyone.

Mayor: They didn't give you a dime?

Irish: No, no.

Mayor: Can you explain that, lieutenant?

Pope: The man is certainly lying, your honor. And he really couldn't remember. If you wished to ask him a question, you see, he couldn't remember what you asked him the last time, the last moment.

Mayor: Well, now, uh, would you have any comment to make on that last statement by the lieutenant?

Irish: Are you Irish?

Mayor: No, I'm Old English.

Irish: Is anybody here Irish?

Pope: I'm half-Irish. My mother was Irish. . . . Are you Irish?

Irish: I'm a leprechaun.

Apparently having decided that an incarcerated self-styled leprechaun may not be the most reliable reporter of police brutality—"Gee whiz," Plimpton remarks to Mailer on the subject, "it bothers me, it bothers my wife, it bothers the newspapers"—the Mayor beats a hasty retreat from both the building and the movie: "I mean, this was a humdinger of a precinct and I'm awfully glad to have met you all."

Plimpton and Mailer's burlesque of a certain crowd-pleasing political style is certainly pointed enough, but their playing is so broad suited and self-consciously coy that the sequence tends to lose its satiric edge the longer it runs on. The scene is also totally inconsistent in tone with the rest of the film: while everybody else in the movie stays within character, Mailer and Plimpton refuse to play their scene straight. Their college-revue mugging and knowing smirks disrupt the carefully contrived air of documentary reality which the other performers throughout the film were laboring hard to establish and sustain. In a number of places Mailer accuses commercial television of always obliterating the mood of its programs: members of the TV generation, we are told in *The Armies of the Night* for example: "we're forced willy-nilly to build their idea of the space-time continuum (and therefore their nervous system) on the jumps and cracks and leaps and breaks which every phenomenon from the media seemed to contain within it."¹⁷

The Plimpton-Mailer set piece brings to this film that same sense of emotional fragmentation which Mailer decried in "every phenomenon from the media": "Television attacks the unconscious like a trip in a jet—you move from continent to continent or spectacle to spectacle without the accompaniment of a change in mood to prepare the flesh."¹⁸ Mailer and Plimpton's comedy routine



Figure 5.4 Writer George Plimpton stars as Mayor in *Beyond the Law* (1968). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

in *Beyond the Law* is too much a battle of wits between literary celebrities, too obviously a form of intellectual vaudeville that has very little to do with the seedy ambiance of big-city police stations or the totalitarian mindsets of obsessed police detectives or even the image-conscious hypocrisies of publicity-seeking liberal politicians. Mailer first asks us to take his movie seriously, then in effect demonstrates that we would be foolish if we did.

Fortunately, however, the film quickly recovers its thematic and stylistic bearings in the following scene, which involves the interrogation of the proprietors and employees of the “Whipping Club” (or “whippy-poops,” as Pope refers to them). The humor in this section isn’t the witty, desiccated High Camp of the Plimpton-Mailer sparring match, but a wise reversion to the healthy, cynical vulgarity of the earlier scenes:

Rocco: (*attempting to identify Fuchs as the model*) Do you have a birthmark on your left cheek?

Ilsa: Do you mean on my face?

Rocco: I mean on your ass.

After patiently explaining to the smirking cops that she was merely trying to get back to a masquerade party in an apartment when she was apprehended in the hall wearing nothing but a mask and boots and carrying a whip, remains nonplussed until one of the detectives informs her

that she might get up to twenty years for engaging in sodomy: "Would you care to expand that theory?" she challenges her accusers indignantly. When Berk tells her that sodomy involves having sex with animals, she quickly gains her composure, if only to demonstrate that Fuchs is no dummy: "It's in the Bible, isn't it?" she asks Rocco and Berk with a knowing leer, adding presumably for her own defense, "Hasn't everybody done that?" As Ilsa, Mara Lynn, one of Supreme Mix's unremarkable dollies in *Wild 90* is much funnier in her similar part here, depicting a hard, strong-willed, and ignorant procuress of unmistakable sexiness and last-gasp, tawdry glamour. She leaves the impression that, as dumb as she is, Ilsa would be a force to reckon with, which is why Mailer's troops enjoy taunting her so much and humiliating her equally sleazy husband, the harried Perry.

While the other detectives continue to kibbitz with the spunky Ilsa, Pope singles out one of her "Whipping Club" compatriots, a raven-haired "Arabic piece" improbably named Lee Ray Rogers, for special consideration, handling her private interrogation personally and quietly. Still provoked by the metaphysical implications of Gahr's revelatory and gratuitous blasphemy, a somber Pope questions Lee Ray on the motivations for her evil behavior: "People engage evil for several reasons. They engage evil in order to defeat it. They engage evil in order to collaborate with it. And they engage evil because they are apathetic about it."

As it turns out, these are the pivotal lines of the film (and a fitting epitaph for the individual interrogation sequences, which conclude on this rather subdued note), since Pope himself will soon have to confront the possibility that his own involvement with evil has cost him some of the same psychological penalties that the criminal learns to bear and sometimes even grows to enjoy.

Pope comes to this realization in the following scene, which depicts the results of his growing estrangement from his wife. While Rocco and Berk are anticipating spending the night with their dates, at another restaurant Mary Pope is asking her husband for a divorce. Beverly Bentley's role as the patient Mary is perhaps the most stereotyped in the film, but, as *Variety's* Byro noted, "she makes it all fresh and new thanks to the sincerity and conviction of her playing."¹⁹ She indeed lends a dignity and straightforwardness to her depiction of a character who could have been more easily portrayed as whining and mawkishly self-serving. Pope discovers just how alienated he has become from his wife when she announces that she is having an affair with Rocco. Although it soon becomes evident in the next scene that she is lying about her involvement with Gibraltar, Mary has inadvertently jeopardized her marriage much more seriously than if she had owned up to an actual affair. By the very fact that she would attempt to shock her husband into a new awareness of her sexual attractiveness by trying to make him jealous of a possible rival indicates to Pope how easily she can manipulate and exploit his love for her. To Pope, this kind of manipulation is far more repugnant than any mere infidelity and forces him to confront the possibility that her dishonesty may be an inevitable consequence of his professional entanglements with criminality. If the evildoer and his pursuer must face the same social and psychological isolation, what then is the difference between them?

Mailer has Pope grappling with this question in two contrasting restaurant scenes. Pope's talk with his wife, in which the superficially defiant lieutenant doesn't so much try to apologize for his marital shortcomings as to instead philosophically defend his compromised career—"I'm the cop who loves criminals," etc.—is followed shortly after by another conversation in a restaurant, this time between Pope and the dark-haired "whippy-poo," Lee Ray Rogers, who gets to hear, conversely, some more long-winded moralizing about the trials and temptations of being a tough and rigid lawman. To his wife, he speaks of how he has failed to withstand corruption and implicitly asks for her compassionate understanding of his moral deficiencies. To the prostitute, he speaks

of how he has withstood corruption and explicitly asks for her knowledgeable guidance into its complex mysteries:

Lee Ray: What do you want to hear? Do you want to hear all the gory secrets of the whipping club?

Pope: You bet I do. I want to hear all of them. Every little one.

To his wife, then, Pope pleads complicity. To the prostitute he feigns ignorance. In between his conversations with the beleaguered spouse and the bemused whore, however, Pope must confront his befuddled colleague. As soon as Mary announces that Rocco has been her lover, Pope becomes interested only in Gibraltar's confirmation or denial. Abruptly leaving his wife, Pope discovers Rocco with Berk and their two dates at the other restaurant. After behaving obnoxiously toward the two startled women—he promises them that, with Berk and Rocco's cooperation, he could usher them into the slammer for “years and years of contemplation, meditation, and abnegation”—the already inebriated lieutenant rather impolitely orders the frightened Rocco into the men's room for a private conference:

Pope: Rock, I'm very fond of you. I've loved you for years. You're a fine fellow and a sterling member of the vice squad, which is to say you're vicious.

Rocco: I know what I can do. You know what I can do.

Pope: You're a dirty fellow with excellent qualities. The police force depends on a judicious mixture of the clean and the filthy. Without that, you're as dispensable as I am. I've never had the slightest doubt about that. There's just one more question I want to ask you: have you been toolin' my wife?

Rocco swears to Pope that he has not engaged in any affair with the lieutenant's wife and assures him that he has always been ready to die by the gun but would prefer not to have it fired by his favorite superior. A sneering Pope then rather inconsiderately informs his buddy, “I know you weren't balling her because you're yellow. . . . You're yellow *vis a vis* me,” and stalks back to the table with his relieved if still mystified colleague. Standing toe to toe and eye to eye with a snarling, woozy Mailer in the cramped quarters of the tiny men's room, Farbar's Rocco evinces a most sympathetic mixture of bug-eyed fear and queasy embarrassment.

Even more arrogant and pointlessly vindictive than when he was on duty, Pope on his return from his restroom confrontation cheerfully announces to the chagrined detectives and their by-now totally alienated dates that he has invited a prostitute to meet him for drinks at the same location. The immediate arrival of a giggling and giddy Lee Ray precipitates the other two women's quick departure, minus their crestfallen boyfriends, who impotently vent their charged-up resentment on an impervious Pope before they too vacate the premises in a disgusted huff:

Berk: Ever think of getting out of the force?

Lee Ray: You know, he's very relaxing.

Pope: Oh yeah. I thought of getting out of the force.

Berk: You know, I think you're a detriment.



Figure 5.5 Actress Beverly Bentley stars in *Beyond the Law* (1968) as Mary Pope. Bentley was married to Norman Mailer at the time of the making of his 1960s film trifecta. Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

Now that he is left alone with a symbolically appropriate foil, Mailer can begin to gather up the loose thematic strands that he and his improvising actors have so deftly strewn around the movie, as well as alluding to a few sobering concepts that he had dropped here and there in his other work. Because, as he tells her, she is “one-half college girl” and “one-half absolutely mad ass,” the type of woman who “shakes hands with a man through her box,” Lee Ray can comprehend and sympathize with Pope’s schizophrenic struggle to either defeat evil or succumb to it, especially as that struggle relates to Pope’s problems with his wife. Although she is superficially just another teasing, high-priced bimbo, Lee Ray holds her own with the maudlin and embittered Irish cop when it comes to matching his blowhard machismo (“I’ve got a heart of iron and in that heart of iron is a mastodon full of iron”) with her own salty metaphors. In so doing, she gains his cynical respect, which allows him to confide in her and blurt out what is really bothering him:

Lee Ray: You whip me with your Avenger and I’ll whip you with my cat of nine tails.

Pope: I carry a broken heart in every knuckle.

Lee Ray: Oh, you’re so sure of yourself.

Pope: Oh, you don’t begin to know. You know why? Well, those you trust, when they betray you, even an inch, give you extraordinary force. That’s the secret of trust. Always trust everyone all the way. ‘Cause the moment they betray you, you know what you’ve got? Jewels . . .

Lee Ray: What jewels? They're jewels of pain.

Pope: (*sadly and quietly*) Aye, that's the college girl.

Pope is not merely spouting sentimental blarney, but sorrow fully (if also theatrically) acknowledging to himself the true significance of what he regards as his wife's betrayal: Mary Pope's gratuitous deception has taught him that he has irrevocably exiled himself to the same isolated, unstable, and morally ambivalent nighttime world beyond the law inhabited by the crooks and the deviants he has devoted his life to identify and pursue. Thus if you can't beat them, Pope muses, you may as well join them, especially after you've discovered that you've always been a part of them, that you and they are inseparable:

Pope: I've never broken my duty until this moment. I've never asked a young lady I've been interrogatin' as a criminal to come out to meet me for a drink. This is the first touch of the taint. I said it was time to become corrupt. It was time to become corrupt—because I love this country. (*Derisive laughter from Lee Ray.*) And I'm willing to go all the way down with it, right down the drain. Doobie doobie doo (*drowning sounds*). Oh, Lord, please save me! Ah, hello, devil! Right down the hole in the john.

Lee Ray: (*who has stooped giggling for a moment*) What are you looking for?

Pope: Corruption.

Having been forced to recognize his irremediable criminal taint, Pope has now decided to willfully embrace depravity. At this point, the two versions of *Beyond the Law* begin to diverge radically. The original version—released initially by Grove Press as *Beyond the Law* in 1968 and then distributed by New Line Cinema in 1971—ends much more conventionally and optimistically than the revised *Beyond the Law-Blue*. In the first version, Mary Pope arrives at the restaurant and chases away the disgruntled Lee Ray ("You've saved me from a heavenly hell," Pope morosely assures his angry wife).

After making up with her and implying that he will change his ways, the tired and drunk detective leaves his wife and joins the equally glum and enervated Berk and Gibraltar at a nearby bar, where they reminisce about what Pope calls "the longest night" and trade a final round of dispirited jokes and affectionate, half-hearted insults: "It was a long night," Pope declares, "I found a girl, I almost lost my wife. I kissed corruption, and I kicked it." Gibraltar at this point interrupts to supply a suitable punchline: "In the ass." The anal image is a happy, appropriate choice to conclude Pope's succinct doggerel-summary of the film's metaphorical concerns. In the last shot of the movie, Mailer is seen propped up on the bar stool between the bleary-eyed and smiling Farbar and Knox, leaning heavily on them as he stares into the camera and asks his two friends and the movie audience:

Mailer: What can I say? Kiss the star. And say: Down the Feds, Up the Irish, Anarchists, and Reds.

This final reassuring evocation of whimsically charming conviviality is gone entirely from *Beyond the Law-Blue* as is most of the sequence dealing with the Popes' hesitant, tentative reconciliation. In the re-edited version, Berk and Gibraltar get their unsubtle revenge on Pope for scaring off their dates, while the seemingly unthreatening Lee Ray is viewed in a considerably more sinister light.

Thus in the *Blue* version, Mailer cuts from the Pope-reconciliation sequence just as the Lieutenant and Mary begin to hit it off to Lee Ray's apartment, where we discover her, alone, engaging in an impromptu candle-lighting ritual during which she invokes the Powers of Darkness. The only earlier hint of a possible involvement with the diabolic occurs during her restaurant conversation with Pope when she describes herself as "a lion with just small claws which have just started to grow," cherishing the idea of giving birth one day to a black cat. Pope, in the same scene, however, is not one to be easily convinced of the sincerity of a prostitute's maternal hopes.

When she politely asks him about the size of his family, he makes it clear that he's in no mood for inconsequential chit-chat: "I might have even more kids than you've cut out of your dirty little womb." Lee Ray throughout the film has taken such unapologetically ripostes with good-humored and slightly spaced-out equanimity, so it comes as a surprise to the viewer of the *Blue* version when she calls upon the forces of the night to help her ensnare the unwitting detective. Her supplications are rather startlingly accompanied by a nude go-go dance, with the camera as sole spectator, and are answered more speedily than any devil-worshipper has the right to expect, what with the imminent appearance of Berk and Gibraltar, whose X-rated behavior will precipitate, in turn, the hurried arrival of Lieutenant Pope himself.

After she completes her nude solo bugaloo—we have apparently strayed a long way from documentary-style *cinéma vérité*—Lee Ray receives a surprise visit from the two vice cops, whose plans for her place them in the same moral position as the pornographers they had earlier arrested: Berk forces her to have sex with him, while Gibraltar takes Polaroid snapshots. The simulated-sex scenes which follow might seem pretty tame by current porno standards—the film was produced just before the hard-core onslaught—but the participants still manage to infuse their calisthenics with an especially grisly coldness and ugliness, due partly to the dispassionate Farbar clicking away on his trusty Polaroid: at one point, Knox actually stops the action to see how some of the pictures came out before climbing back on top of the numb but still cooperative Lee Ray. When they finally get through with the agreeably acquiescent call girl, the spiteful duo show up with the incriminating pictures at the bar where Pope is morosely drinking alone and deciding whether to go back to his wife. Pope's promises to Mary are apparently forgotten, however, as he stalks off to Lee Ray's place to confront her with this latest proof of her self-destructive treachery.

This final confrontation between the angst-ridden good guy, continuously searching for moral certitude in an ambiguous universe, and the demonically assured bad woman does not quite turn into the apocalyptic, spiritually purifying tug-of-war which we have been led to expect, both from the way the film has been structured and from Mailer's previous work. In *An American Dream*, for example, Stephen Rojack had to face the choice of saving his endangered true love, a battered but unbowed nightclub chanteuse named Cherry, or deliberately stepping into a situation which would have endangered his very soul. Being the full-fledged Mailerian hero that he is, Rojack consciously renounces the safety and security of a loving future with Cherry (thus more or less condemning her to death) in order to confront the moral and physical initiation of fighting his demonic father-in-law on the old man's own turf. A similar fateful choice awaited Lieutenant Pope, and the two different versions of his nighttime adventures dramatize the consequences of his two possible courses of action. In *Beyond the Law* Pope decides to remain with his wife and continue his frustrating duties as a tough, honest cop, while in *Blue* he elects to engage evil on its own terms, fighting fire with fire and thus traveling farther beyond the law than even he had previously dared to go. The ending of the original version is unsatisfactory because it is too reminiscent of the familiar Hollywood cop-movie formula: all that the tough police detective really needed in order to regain his humanity was the love of a good woman, the kind of love usually manifested by the detective's neglected, patient,



Figure 5.6 Actress/model Lee Roscoe as Lee Ray Rogers with Norman Mailer in *Beyond the Law* (1968). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

and only momentarily embittered wife. With the original ephemeral plotline resolved in this clichéd manner, it becomes obvious that the only law beyond which the pioneering cinematic explorer has led us is the one which governs movie copyrights.

There are similar problems with the *Blue* version's alternate conclusion. When Pope arrives at Lee Ray's apartment to confront her with the pornographic pictures, she invites him to calm down and share some marijuana with her. Expertly inhaling on the proffered joint, he exclaims proudly, "D'ya know this is the first time I've ever tried this stuff?" To anyone even remotely familiar with Mailer's career and his widely self-publicized experiments with drugs of all sorts, this line must come across as the kind of hammy and self-indulgent in-joke which *Wild 90* by its very blighted existence epitomized. After a few minutes of nuzzling and groping, the two disrobe, she to the buff and he to his jockey shorts. Both are seen crouching on the living-room couch, staring at each other, obviously waiting for one or the other to initiate something. Mailer purses his lips in an obstreperous spoiled-infant pout, snarls at his companion with a wide-open, king-of-the-beasts roar, bares his imaginary fangs and claws at her, while she purrs and snuggles up with feline grace. Mailer puts an abrupt end to the catty foreplay, however, when he pulls back from her, squats down, pouts at her for a couple of seconds, then quickly jabs his foot in the immediate direction of her nose (in *Public Enemy* (1931), Cagney actually landed a grapefruit in Mae Clark's face, but *Beyond the Law* was produced in more enlightened times).

This action must have had dire symbolic significance for Lee Ray, because we see her in the next shot (presumably after some time had elapsed), cringing from her leonine lover and shrieking

in a nervous, high-pitched, little-girl's voice, "You're a devil! You're a devil!" Some seemingly impregnable defense must have been breached, for we next see Lee Ray dead on the floor, glassy-eyed and staring into the camera, her face and torso smeared with dark stuff that looks like blood, her body and hair swaying to and fro in languorous slow-motion, like a corpse under water, while all about her swirl floating black and gray specks (more blood). Pope has thus destroyed evil by collaborating with it, although darned if the viewer knows how the heck he did it, except by waving his big toe in front of the docile prostitute's face. He looks rather satisfied with himself, though, in the last shot of the movie, hanging on to Rocco and Berk in that barroom as he says good night to us, although the doggerel he recited at the conclusion of the original film has been cut from the *Blue* version. The eerie psychedelic music, the fancy slow-motion photography, and the swirling, super-imposed special effects as Lee Ray dissolves in her own gore, all help to impose a high-toned, avant-garde movie seriousness to the project for which such funny, pseudo-Irish versifying would seem highly inappropriate, although not quite as out of place as grafting pretentious, impressionistic, experimental-movie footage onto the finale of a grainy, documentary-style, improvised detective movie.

Other than for their differing conclusions, the original and *Blue* versions are virtually identical, except for certain small cuts in the later version from interrogation sequences that had seemed to run too long in the original print: these excisions, however, do wonders in tightening up the pace of the film. Indeed, perhaps the ideal way of seeing Mailer's best movie is by getting hold of both versions, viewing the entire print of *Beyond the Law* and then running the last reel of *Beyond the Law-Blue*.

In this manner, Mailer's theme concerning the consequences of free choice in his morally perceptive policeman-protagonist can be vividly dramatized with a cumulative force that would be lacking if the viewer were familiar with only one or the other of the two filmed outcomes. Another advantage of juxtaposing both conclusions is that the viewer hopefully may forget that, taken individually, they have little to do with the first two-thirds of the movie that they share. The reconciliation scene, the confrontation between Lee Ray and Mary Pope, and the half-sentimental, half-campy Irish blarney of Mailer's barroom farewell in the first version are unappealing mixtures of Hollywood phoniness and Mailerian bravado in flaunting his inability to meaningfully structure and resolve his movie's spontaneously evolving dramatic conflicts.

Pope's behavior throughout the last third of the first version reflects an ambiguous jumble of contradictory motivations that don't really help to illustrate the nevertheless repeatedly emphasized notion that there is an important and complex connection between Pope's fascination with criminality and his alienation from his wife and family. When his wife asks him for a divorce, Pope laconically blames his unhealthy attraction to evil as the prime reason for this mutual estrangement: the Good Lord wanted him to be a cop because he had a "touch of the taint" and because he was a "lay-tent homosexual." When she tells him that she has been having an affair with one of his best friends and closest professional colleagues, he angrily confronts the alleged lover, even though he admits to him that he really couldn't take his wife's confession seriously. When he meets a prostitute to ostensibly drive himself deliberately deeper into the heart of darkness, he tells her that it is his wife who has betrayed his trust (one would have thought that it is the other way around) and that her betrayal demonstrates to him the extent of his ever-growing distance from her and the rest of normal society. Yet when his wife arrives and throws out the prostitute, he does nothing but sit meekly by and, when he does intervene, sides with his wife and demands that the prostitute leave.

Why should his wife's attack on Lee Ray affect his attitude toward her earlier prevarication, which is what drove him to the edge of despair in the first place? Although he strongly implies to



Figure 5.7 The final scene of the first version: Mailer friend/screenwriter/actor Mickey Knox as Berk with Buzz Farbar as Rocco with Norman Mailer (C) in *Beyond the Law* (1968). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

Lee Ray that it was his wife's betrayal which made him further seek out corruption, it is clear that Pope made the invitation to Lee Ray to join him at the bar when he was interrogating her, that is, long before Mary's false confession. So, just in terms of the story line, there is no demonstrable connection between Pope's obsession with criminality and his growing detachment from his wife. Thematically simplistic and formulaically predictable—the motivation of character may be one of the prime defects of the conventional “well-made” Hollywood films, as Mailer has argued, but his own improvisational approach to cinematic character development in this film seems to confuse the ambiguous for the merely arbitrary, the complex for the pointlessly contradictory.

Simple cause and effect take an even worse battering in the alternate ending. Everything that happens in the original version up to the point of Mary's fight with Lee Ray holds true for *Beyond the Law-Blue*, so we are confronted in the newer version with the same vague motivations that more or less cancel each other out in the original film. Lee Ray's sudden transformation from giddy, amiable call-girl to serious, evil witch is as dramatically unjustified in terms of what we actually see as Pope's jumbled motivations or sudden changes in temperament. Pope and Lee Ray's sexual battle of wills is ridiculously stylized when it is placed within the context of the film's nitty-gritty, documentary-style realism. The transfixed Lee Ray's horrified recognition of Pope as a devil is likewise silly and unprepared for: the worst that the petulant-looking Pope can be accused of in their sex scenes is a mild tendency toward foot fetishism. As we have already noticed in *The Deer Park* and *Why Are We In Vietnam?*

Mailer elsewhere has had problems attempting to show evil people indulging themselves in evil activities or good people courageously battling evil forces: the embattled Pope playing footsie and king-of-the-cats with an increasingly horrified Lee Ray is on the same heroic-Byronic scale as Stephen Rojack fending off his powerful and degenerate father-in-law with a magic umbrella while our hero walks the balcony-parapet of the old man's New York skyscraper penthouse. And Lee Ray's candle-lighting invocations and nude dancing are on the same order of diabolic perversity as Marion Faye's dabbling in Tarot cards or his gunning the motor of his sportscar down the quiet residential streets of Desert D'Or in the middle of the night in hopes of waking the neighbors in *The Deer Park*.

Mailer could have at least provided a suitably melodramatic fate for Lee Ray commensurate to the mordant seediness of the earlier interrogation sequences, instead of portraying her dissolution by means of a lot of pretentious underground-movies unrealistic symbolism. This ending makes more sense than the pointless sad-sack cheeriness of Mailer's barroom swansong directed to the audience of the first version, but the spook-show pyrotechnics of Lee Ray's demise not only violate the carefully contrived *cinéma vérité* tone, but also, in their flashy vagueness, demonstrate Mailer's failure to portray, in the same naturalistic style so convincingly utilized throughout most of the film, the apocalyptic results of his protagonist's pent-up, avenging-angel hostility after it has been deliberately and coldly released.

Mailer has built up to a violent climax and then cannot think of a way of showing it in a manner consistent with the rest of the movie. This is true for both versions: in the original film, Mailer sidesteps the problem by morally regenerating his hero before he even had a chance to be properly tempted, much less fail; in the revised version, Mailer can contrive to suggest only in an extremely elliptical fashion the redemptive powers of violence. What we end up with, then, in both films is the cinematic equivalent of the non-sequitur, a shaggy police-dog story of spurious and undeveloped thematic resonances, heavy-handed stylistic anomalies, and needlessly unrelieved tensions.

Both movies fall apart at the end because of the inherent shapelessness of improvisational film-making. Mailer is right when he argues that the dangers and the possibilities of working without a script will lead almost automatically to a higher degree of intensity and concentration on the part of the actors, if they are good enough and are in tune with the extemporized situation, since each performer has his or her own idea about how a given scene should play and his or her role in it. But if each of these histrionic slugging matches results in a clear-cut winner—somebody who can overpower the rest of the ensemble by sheer theatrical force and can thus successfully impose his or her own meaning on whatever is going on at that extemporized moment—then at the end of shooting the editor, he would be left with the unenviable task of trying to piece together a bunch of dramatic highlights, each in its own way a cinematic knockout. It would be like trying to piece together a flowing, coherent narrative exclusively out of the scenes that they show in the previews of coming attractions.

Beyond the Law is indeed made up of complete, self-contained, power-packed vignettes, thanks to the dynamic, improvisational interaction of its cast, and the movie works as well as it does because the individual interrogation scenes, which take up roughly two-thirds of the running time in each version, have their own built-in structure and focus (how will each suspect stand up to it, and is justice being served in each case?). In this kind of set-up, there is plenty of room for theatrical bravura whether you're playing a cop or a crook, yet the scene stealing can never get totally out of control because of the rigid demands and expectations of each performer's role in the police-precinct context. After shooting is completed, all the editor would then have to do with these isomorphic segments is to decide on how best to chop them up and juxtapose the pieces.

The rhythm and movement of all the interrogation scenes are roughly alike at comparable points, so a piece of action or dialogue in one sequence could easily be matched up with or contrasted to similar moments in other sequences.

For the most part, this method works in *Beyond the Law*: it's only when Mailer leaves the station-house that things go awry. The restaurant scenes with Berk, Gibraltar, and their dates aren't bad, but we can never really forget that their sole purpose is to act as a framing device to plug up holes in the film's continuity. The cops' conversations and kibbitzing with the two models are simply cues to segue us into the important scenes. When Mailer, for whatever reasons, cannot rely on this obviously desperate gambit, his staging of narrative transitions is clumsy and confused. Thus we never find out how exactly the handcuffed Popcorn got the gun for his breakout attempt, because the shot is too abrupt and the camera too close in on Rip Torn's face for us to see his apparent quick-wittedness and dexterity.

Another crudely directed sequence which functions strictly as a linking scene is the one in the *Blue* version where the two vice cops display to Pope the porno snapshots of Lee Ray and Berk in action. Given the always unpredictable lieutenant's earlier bizarre conduct with Rocco, you'd think that his two underlings would at least show a modicum of hesitation or fearful anticipation before they taunt him any further, or even a rudimentary form of vindictive bravado as they do it.



Figure 5.8 Actress Lee Roscoe dances for Mailer's Pope at her apartment in the revised version of Mailer's *Beyond the Law* (1968), called *Beyond the Law-Blue* (1970). 35mm triacetate projection print. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

But they exhibit none of these feelings: their expression and bearing in this short sequence merely manifest a mild voyeuristic titillation, as if they had simply wanted to share a harmlessly risqué prank with someone who would appreciate a good joke, even when it was on him. These awkward bridging sequences, then, seem like hurried afterthoughts, but even if they were handled with more attention and skill, they could not alter both films' fundamental disjointedness and air of deliberate but misconceived irresolution.

Mailer thought that he could sidestep many of the structural problems implicit in his open-ended scenarios by attempting to orchestrate the action in front of the camera as well as behind it. "The way I make the film," Mailer told Joseph Gelmis, "I have to act in it. It's the only way I can direct it. Because there's no script, something has to be going on in scenes. And so there has to be somebody in the scene who really has some conception of what he's driving toward."²⁰

In *Beyond the Law*, however, it soon becomes evident that Mailer's on-screen method of exercising control over his extemporizing performers, rather than helping to impose a unified tone on his diverse material, actually adds to the general thematic and stylistic confusion. His Lieutenant Pope is obviously patterned after the dedicated and obsessive homicide detective in *An American Dream*: the offensive, pushy sentimentality and petty, aimless vindictiveness of the movie's Lieutenant Pope is paralleled by the authoritarian schizophrenia of the novel's Lieutenant Roberts. At the end of the novel's last chapter, for example, Roberts is still trying to pin a murder rap on the officially-cleared Rojack and, barring that, attempts to goad Rojack, who is mourning the death of Cherry, into a fight:

And Roberts took me to an after-hours joint, and kind as a mother, fed me whiskey, and finally confessed that on the night before, returning home to Queens after interrogating me, he had awakened an old mistress for a drinking bout—first time in three years—had drunk the morning in, beaten the mistress up, and still had not called the wife. Then he asked me if I had anything to do with Shago's murder, and when I said no, Roberts explained it was not his mistress but his wife he had beaten last night, just why he did not know, had Cherry been a good piece of ass, and when I looked up with outrage at that appetite for the treacherous which rides the Irish like a leper, he said, "Did you know she did some work for us?"—said it in such a way I would never know for certain, not ever, there was something in his voice I could not for certain deny; and Roberts said, "If you don't like it, rat fink, take it out on the street," and when I with all the courage of the ashes said yes, let's go to the street, Roberts said, "Do you know what frustration is to a cop? Why, that's how we lose it," he said, "our standards, our quality" and his features began to reef, and Roberts began to cry. The Irish are the only men who know how to cry for the dirty polluted blood of all the world.²¹

We should note how the beerhall-maudlin crankiness of Mailer's tough-guy rhetoric in this passage and in the earlier precinct sequences in the novel anticipate some of Pope's juicier, bittersweet formulations.

There is, however, one important tactical difference between Mailer's impromptu hambone performance as Pope and his more assiduous handling of Roberts: while the movie's Lieutenant Pope bulldozes his way into practically every scene, whether his special interrogational talents are needed or not, in the novel Rojack's nemesis Lieutenant Roberts is very effectively kept on the sidelines most of the time, moving onto center stage to badger his prey only at the most psychologically threatening moments, when Rojack is most tired or paranoiacally tense. Mailer not only dissipates Pope's moral authority by making him omnipresent, but manages also to transform

what could have been the character's occasional mock-heroic grandiloquence into mere diffuse garrulousness.

As in *Wild 90* no matter what ideas are being bandied about by the improvising performers or how well they are doing in the scene without him, Mailer will, more often than not, eventually step in to the action in order to point out the philosophical significance of their activities or try to maneuver them into making the metaphysical point for him. The keynote, indeed, of Lieutenant Pope's character is a moral gregariousness that often borders on the aimlessly pompous, as Mailer implied in an interview with Vincent Canby:

"The Irish have always had what the Jews didn't have, and the Jews have always had what the Irish didn't have. The Jews have always had this funny knowledge that if you respect life enough, it's going to respect you back. The Irish have never understood that. On the other hand, the Irish have this great bravura, a style, and elegance. If I were playing a Jewish detective, I could never use the kind of language that Pope indulges. I thought if we were going to do improvisation, the only point is to show what you can do with the language of improvisation. An Irishman can say anything he wants at any given moment, and no one is going to argue with it too much. In other words, as an Irishman I can have moral conversations with my prisoners that I could never have if I were any other kind of detective." The novelist suddenly becomes Mailer-Pope. "What's a nice Irish lad like yourself," he said, rolling his R's out across the Algonquin dining room, "doin' becomin' a beast?"²²

Mailer may have been right when he told Canby that the main advantage of making Pope Irish was to shrewdly allow his constant philosophizing more credibility in terms of the film's New York police-precinct milieu, but he never stopped to think whether the movie really needed the kind of running commentary that Lieutenant Pope interminably provides, especially when so much of the improvised action is emotionally and thematically complex as it is, without Mailer-Pope's continuous coaxing, prodding, and interpreting. Culturally conditioned as a tabloid-romantic, police-blotter-poetic New York Irishman or not, Mailer-Pope piles onto the forceful melodramatics a layer of intellectualizing as thick and as unnecessary as his on-again, off-again brogue.

With so many different and often contradictory concepts so gratuitously introduced—the policeman as bully-boy, the policeman as God's agent of vengeance and order, the policeman as family man, the policeman as lover, the policeman as "lay-tent homosexual," the relationship between the policeman and the criminal, between the policeman and the prostitute, between the policeman and his wife, between the policeman and the liberal politician, between the policeman and his girlfriend, between the policeman and other policemen, etc.—no wonder that Mailer had to revert to anachronistic formula or fall back on murky stylization to finish off his over-burdened movie. How could he gather all of this material into one coherently structured visual narrative, especially when so little of it was being reflected dramatically in the spontaneously evolving conflicts?

Pauline Kael once commented that Jean-Luc Godard "is not the kind of artist who can provide an intellectual structure commensurate with the brilliance of his style and the quality of his details."²³ Just the opposite can be said of Mailer's work in this film is the film's frequently brilliant improvised vignettes and the often strikingly divergent visual styles cannot, taken together, live up to the sort of huge conceptual framework Mailer seemed to be hinting at through his on-screen philosophical ruminations, soliloquies, and asides.

When the original version of *Beyond the Law* premiered at the 1968 New York Film Festival and was subsequently given its commercial-theatrical release, the critics could not agree on whether



Figure 5.9 Frame for remaining elements of Norman Mailer's *Beyond the Law-Blue* (1970). Actress/model Lee Roscoe as Lee Ray engages with Mailer's Pope as he visits her apartment. From there they smoke marijuana and engage in sexual intercourse. 35mm triacetate projection print. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

Mailer's running commentary or his final-scene violation of the carefully contrived *cinéma vérité* style actually provided the kind of thematic and structural coherence for a narrative fictional film ostensibly intended for the mass audience that, previously, only a tightly-knit script and rigid directoral control could supply. (The reviewers never did get their chance to comment on the later *Blue* version: it was released directly for the 16mm college film society circuit without any theatrical bookings.) Surprisingly the most favorable notice turned out to be the one in *Variety*, a publication not given to hyperbolic adulation when it comes to sizing up the low-budget, non-professional, avant-garde product; on the other hand, it will be recalled that *Variety*'s Byro was also one of the few people who actually dared to go on record to state that he saw something which closely resembled a redeeming quality in *Wild 90*. That same reviewer liked *Beyond the Law* even more, calling it: "One of the most realistic and frightening studies of the police man and his world which has ever been made."²⁴ Byro didn't mind that troublesome last scene where Mailer drops all cinema pretense and talks directly into the camera. In fact, he thought that the final sequence actually helps the film to triumphantly transcend the formulaic limitations of its humble cops-and-robbers origins:

The last half-hour of the picture spotlights the personal situation of Mailer and two of his underlings as they spend their after-hours with wives and girlfriends. Though entirely different

from previous footage, it's neatly slipped into as the characters of the three men have been strongly established. Here Mailer begins to express his realization of the ambiguities and complexities of the policeman's life. Slowly, what had been almost a documentary examination takes on more and more the look of the fictional film until the picture ends on an artificial note with Mailer addressing the audience. Strangely and marvelously, it all makes organic sense as demonstrating that the "social truth" of real life leads inevitably to the "aesthetic truth" of fiction. And it is here that the film's ultimate influence and importance may lie. As had no previous U.S. film, *Beyond the Law* brings *cinéma vérité* methods into national story traditions, thus extending technique while revitalizing an American genre which has proved uniquely expressive.²⁵

The film's other admirers were not quite so effusive in their praise. While not denying the extent of Mailer's achievement in "revitalizing an American genre which has proved uniquely expressive," most of them were more interested in questioning just how well Mailer managed to integrate his *cinéma vérité* methods with those "national story traditions"—an interesting euphemism for the stereotyped conventions of pop-culture—that Byro mentioned. Thus both *New York Times* reviewers on separate occasions implied that Mailer's on-screen garrulousness was an attempt to cover-up his lack of technical assurance: the film "is so good and tough and entertaining so much of the time," wrote Vincent Canby when the movie opened at the New York Film Festival, "that you simply have to forgive those moments when the actors suddenly smirk self-consciously . . . and when it becomes unintelligible, as old Word Head himself does occasionally."²⁶ Renata Adler was more tolerant of the peculiarities of Mailer's improvised performance ("Mr. Mailer's Irish accent becomes a deadly affection over the long haul, but the way he moves his face, particularly his mouth and nose—like something between a staff sergeant and a household pet—is real acting after all"), although she did land heavily on the film's technical inadequacies:

Ironically, the camerawork, by D.A. Pennebaker, who has made, among other fine films, *Don't Look Back* (1967), is abominable. Pointless wipes, and cuts and shots of faces in close-ups. Perhaps this is Mailer's direction, but the meaninglessness of the photographic technique makes one wish it were a radio play.²⁷

The critics who did not like the movie at all simply took these stylistic crudities for slovenly self-indulgence. For Stanley Kauffmann, who apparently was still nursing his bruised sensibilities after having been subjected to *Wild 90*, the film was "without merit or interest except as it affords a peek, for those who care, into the private games of Mailer and pals pretending to be cops and criminals and hippies." He was not very sympathetic toward Mailer's theoretical aims either:

Those who are dedicated to finding value in everything that Mailer does can find more of it; here, I'm sure. Those who find something of *vérité* in every foot of film that's exposed by egotistical amateurs can write their reams about this picture's relevance to role playing in modern life. Good luck to them. I take this film simply as part of the price for having Mailer around.²⁸

Judith Crist in *New York* found the film to be—in its deliberate raggedness—a contemptible reversion to the muddled, stylized posturings of the old-system cinematic avant-garde:

Norman Mailer's *Beyond the Law* [demonstrates] that the Old Underground ain't what it used to be and the New Left is being formulized right out of the scene. Those old days of bad lighting,

incoherence, obscenity, and obfuscation are on the way out. Not the bad lighting, so much—but the rest of it. True, the sound track was absolutely abysmal and you couldn't hardly tell what anybody was saying during whole parts of *Beyond the Law*, but shucks, all this new “underground” masterpiece turned out to be was a sort of grainy black-and-white, plotless, up-date of *Detective Story* (1951), a Quickie Tour of Your Friendly Neighborhood Precinct House minus Jack Webb, an “expose” that barely matched the telecasts from Chicago. In fact, all that saved it from utter squaredom was the lousy lighting, setting and bad acting complete with self-conscious smirks.²⁹

The Nation's Robert Hatch also linked Mailer's film work to the “American Underground Cinema” and discovered that they indeed shared the same stylistic and theoretical flaws:

Mailer is aware of the underground cinema and must know himself more talented and vigorous than the bulk of that feckless brotherhood. If they can produce a cult out of ineptitude, he should be able to turn it into art. It doesn't work. *Beyond the Law* is less irritating than dull. The theory that an audience will participate in dishevelment is fallacious; it will rather withdraw into its own reveries.³⁰

Hatch's criticisms were more pointed and specific than those from the film's other detractors because he treated Mailer's film-making career as an aesthetic failure rather than a moral one. He was able to perceive exactly where Mailer's theoretical model broke down in actual practice because he took Mailer's film theory at face value and did not make the mistake of regarding it merely as a high-blown rationalization for a sloppily-executed con game. Thus his attack on Mailer's misdirected energies must be taken with far more seriousness than the irate fulminations of an impatient Crist or Kauffmann, since he is able to tell the difference between a pompously devious swindler and a pretentious sly, earnest bungler:

The film is not oriented; you never know how you got where you are. The individual scenes cannot be assimilated because the cameras work so close as to destroy spatial relationships. And the dialogue is “legible” only in fragments, partly because untrained performers do not speak well, partly because Mailer feels that speech (particularly his own speech) is more important as “make-up” than as communication. The cumulative effect of all this improvisation is to produce in the viewer a sensation of partial anesthesia, as though he had deadened his responses with whiskey. It may be evident at this point why Mailer has abandoned professionalism in his work for the screen. He may well believe that the predictable inadequacies of “spontaneous” creation will stimulate the sodden opacities of contemporary society. One cannot hold a reader by mumbling in print (though there was a period when Mailer appeared to be trying it), but an audience is more captive, and can perhaps be persuaded to accept stultification for dessert.³¹

For the most part, Hatch's observations are quite accurate, yet a more balanced view would not have neglected those quite remarkable and not infrequent isolated moments, cut off from each other as much by accident as by design, when the improvising actors perhaps surprised even themselves and manifested a rare poignancy, fascination, and terror over the spontaneously-wrought life-and-death predicaments in which they found themselves during those four eventful nights in that crowded, squalid, make-believe precinct-house. Given the talent and emotion expended, it is a genuine pity that Mailer could not have drawn all of that marvelous material together and made the assembled-produce say exactly what he wanted it to say. Probably the



Figure 5.10 Frame from remaining elements of *Beyond the Law-Blue* (1970). Mailer's Pope, after murdering Lee Ray takes some of her blood and smears it on his face. He then promptly stares directly into the camera. 35mm triacetate projection print. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

most damaging critique of *Beyond the Law*, then, was inadvertently supplied by Mailer himself when Rick Stratton of *Rolling Stone* asked him in 1974 to comment on Mick Jagger's "Sympathy for the Devil":

[Stratton]: Take a song like "Sympathy for the Devil." You have to go a long way—Bob Dylan's probably the only other one, plus some songs from the Beatles—you have to go a long way before you get lines as interesting in rock as, "Just as every cop is a criminal and all the sinners saints."

[Mailer]: What's splendid, what's new about that? Dostoevsky used to go into an epileptic fit he grew so bored with that notion.³²

Notes

- 1 Gelmis, Joseph (1970), *The Film Director As Superstar*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday: 57.
- 2 Mailer, Norman (1971), *Maidstone: A Mystery*, New York: Signet: 173.
- 3 Mailer, Norman (1971), *Maidstone: A Mystery*, New York: Signet: 172.
- 4 Adams, Laura (1976), *Existential Battles: The Growth of Norman Mailer*, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press: 143.
- 5 Mailer, Norman (1971), *Maidstone: A Mystery*, New York: Signet: 172.
- 6 Adams, Laura (1976), *Existential Battles: The Growth of Norman Mailer*, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press: 143.

- 7 Mailer, Norman (1965), *An American Dream*, New York: The Dial Press: 17.
- 8 Mailer, Norman (1959), *Advertisements for Myself*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 339.
- 9 Mailer, Norman (1959), *Advertisements for Myself*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 343.
- 10 "Byro" (1968), Review of *Beyond the Law*, quoted in *Filmfacts*, Vol. 11, No. 24 (January 15, 1969): 449. This review was originally published in *Variety*, October 2, 1968.
- 11 Mailer, Norman (1959), *Advertisements for Myself*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 355.
- 12 Mailer, Norman (1971), *Maidstone: A Mystery*, New York: Signet: 163.
- 13 Kael, Pauline (1976), *Reeling*, Boston: Little, Brown: 122.
- 14 Kauffmann, Stanley (1971), *Figures of Light: Film Criticism and Comment*, New York: Harper & Row: 49.
- 15 Mailer, Norman (1959), *Advertisements for Myself*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 347.
- 16 Mailer, Norman (1959), *Advertisements for Myself*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 343.
- 17 Mailer, Norman (1968), *The Armies of the Night*, New York: The New American Library: 87.
- 18 Mailer, Norman (1972), *Existential Errands*, Boston: Little, Brown: 79.
- 19 "Byro" (1968), Review of *Beyond the Law*, quoted in *Filmfacts*, Vol. 11, No. 24 (January 15, 1969): 449. This review was originally published in *Variety*, October 2, 1968.
- 20 Gelmis, Joseph (1970), *The Film Director As Superstar*, Garden City, NY: Doubleday: 50.
- 21 Mailer, Norman (1965), *An American Dream*, New York: The Dial Press: 264.
- 22 Quoted from Canby, Vincent (1968), "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling, It's Norman Mailer" in *New York Times*, October 7, 1968, Sec. 2, p. 15.
- 23 Kael, Pauline (1968), *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang*, Boston: Little, Brown: 115.
- 24 "Byro" (1968), Review of *Beyond the Law*, quoted in *Filmfacts*, Vol. 11, No. 24 (January 15, 1969): 449. This review was originally published in *Variety*, October 2, 1968.
- 25 "Byro" (1968), Review of *Beyond the Law*, quoted in *Filmfacts*, Vol. 11, No. 24 (January 15, 1969): 449. This review was originally published in *Variety*, October 2, 1968.
- 26 Canby, Vincent (1968), "Norman Mailer Offers *Beyond the Law*," in *New York Times*, September 30, 1968: 60.
- 27 Adler, Renata (1968), Review of *Beyond the Law*, in *New York Times*, October 24, 1968: 55.
- 28 Kauffmann, Stanley (1971), *Figures of Light: Film Criticism and Comment*, New York: Harper & Row: 115.
- 29 Crist, Judith (1969), "Review of *Beyond the Law*," quoted in *Filmfacts*, Vol. 11, No. 24, January 15, 1969: 169. Her review was originally published in *New York*, October 21, 1968.
- 30 Hatch, Richard (1968), "Films" review of *Beyond the Law*, in *The Nation*, November 11, 1968: 508. Hatch was right—Mailer did not care much for the products of the American Underground Cinema: "[. . .] the greater liberty of the low-budget underground film is of necessity given to an unpaid actor who is therefore invariable an amateur, and so tends to project an agreeable, innocent, usually bizarre self-consciousness (much like the square and crazy flavor in the postures of a home movie). The underground movie tends for this among other reasons to become an inside joke, and looks for playful situations or nightmares which members of the club can appreciate out of the focus on their own games. But then average underground film is not rushing to give a mirror of the time, just an amusement-park mirror" (Mailer, Norman (1972), *Existential Errands*, Boston: Little, Brown: 108).
- 31 Mailer, Norman (1972), *Existential Errands*, Boston: Little, Brown: 108.
- 32 Stratton, Richard (1975), "The Rolling Stone Interview with Norman Mailer, Part II: Sympathy for the Devil," in *Rolling Stone*, January 16, 1975: 47.

6

“ALL OF US ARE POLICEMEN, ALL OF US ARE CRIMINALS”: DISCOVERING DOSTOEVSKY IN A RE-EVALUATION OF *BEYOND THE LAW*

Catriona McAvoy

Throughout his work Norman Mailer explored Dostoevskian themes of criminality; good and evil, punishment and redemption and the duality of man. In *Beyond the Law*, his 1968 film, these ideas are explored during a night of confrontational interrogations at a police station. The unreleased version of this film *Beyond the Law-Blue* (1970) takes these concepts further and shockingly shows corruption at its most extreme.

Mailer believed Fyodor Dostoevsky and Leo Tolstoy to be the greatest writers of all time. In a 1948 interview he admitted to having an “uneasy feeling that . . . between them [they] have written everything worth writing.”¹ However, he continued producing his own work, stating in 1961: “I have one ambition above all others, it is to write a novel which Dostoevsky and Mark; Joyce and Freud; Stendhal, Tolstoy, Proust and Spengler; Faulkner and even old moldering Hemingway might come to read; for it would carry what they had to tell another part of the way.”² A lofty ambition certainly, but Mailer never did shy away from making bold statements. He made many direct references to Dostoevsky in interviews, through his writing and in his unpublished personal journal. It is also interesting to note the parallels between their lives that may go some way to explain the affinity Mailer felt with the Russian author. Lee Roscoe who played Lee Ray Rogers in *Beyond the Law* and who had a relationship with Mailer recalls him saying “I would like to have the verbal power of Dostoevsky.”³

This chapter explores Dostoevsky’s influence on *Beyond the Law* and suggests a current re-evaluation of the film considering its place in history and its legacy. The film is given a thorough Dostoevskian reading; examining the scenario, the character types and the narrative themes. The analysis is then furthered by drawing on research from the film’s development, interviews with Mailer and entries from his unpublished “Lipton’s Journal” in order to understand his motivation for creating this Dostoevskian study in criminality. The chapter concludes by suggesting a re-appraisal of the film based on the evidence presented. A consideration of the work’s historical value and its

echoes in contemporary cinema such as Abel Ferrara's *Bad Lieutenant* (1993) demands that this film should be counted alongside Mailer's other significant achievements.

Beyond the Law: Crime

In *Beyond the Law* Mailer creates a realist nightmare of criminality with a line-up of seedy characters accused of sordid sexual and violent crimes and interrogated over the course of one highly charged evening. The police are depicted as aggressive, brutal and misogynistic and in their free time the line between cop and criminal is blurred. Mailer points out that:

These people are suspects. We don't know whether they're criminals or not. But finally it comes down to cops and crooks anyway. And that's the relation. Because whether you're innocent or guilty, when you're in a police station you're treated as if you're a crook. So existentially you are a crook. At the moment, everything in you is reacting as a crook. You're in trouble. You're now beyond the law.⁴

Like Dostoevsky, Mailer weaves references to religion, politics and society into the narrative. Themes of sin, redemption and guilt are explored and corruption underscores many of the interactions.

The scenario of many characters locked up in a police station borrows directly from Dostoevsky's depictions of imprisonment in *Crime and Punishment*, *The House of the Dead* and *The Grand Inquisitor* section of *The Brothers Karamazov*. The setting allows Mailer to explore the spectrum between saint and psychopath. Mailer's police cells are populated with criminals and innocents accused of a variety of morally questionable acts. The characters echo those from Dostoevsky's work and their crimes are familiar to his depictions of moral and ethical dilemmas. The film begins in a restaurant where two vice-squad detectives Mickey Berk (Mickey Knox) and Rocco Gibraltar (Buzz Farbar) meet with two women Marcia Stillwell (Marsha Mason) and Mary Wilson Price (Judy Grundy) for a blind date. Here the similarities between cop and crook are introduced as one of the women asks Gibraltar: "Whatever possessed you to become a policeman?" He replies: "Well I was either going to become a policeman or become a criminal. I was beating up people anyway, I thought I might as well beat them up and get on the right side of the law." From here the scene is set and in a series of flashbacks the characters in the police station are interrogated.

First Lieutenant Francis Xavier Pope (Norman Mailer) is seen aggressively addressing all of the suspects in a line up before they are taken to cells for individual interrogations and the Dostoevskian characters are revealed. There is a man who calmly and clearly confesses to murdering his wife with an axe (Edward Bonetti). This is not Mailer's first character to commit uxoricide: in *An American Dream* Mailer's main protagonist Stephen Rojack murders his wife by strangling her during a fight, he then throws her dead body out of a window to cover his tracks. Rojack and his moral crisis can be compared to the lead character Rodion Raskolnikov from Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* who kills an elderly female pawnbroker and her sister with an axe in a botched robbery and eventually confesses to the authorities. In this same story the character Arkady Svidrigailov is suspected of killing his wife and is haunted by her ghost.

Both the character Isay Fomich and the narrator in *The House of the Dead* commit this same crime. In real life Norman Mailer stabbed his wife Adele Morales with a pen knife in 1960, she



Figure 6.1 Norman Mailer with friend and poet Edward Bonetti in *Beyond the Law* (1968). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

required emergency surgery but recovered and dropped the charges. He pleaded guilty to assault and received a suspended sentence. Years later he stated: “It changed everything. . . . It is the one act I can look back on and regret for the rest of my life.”⁵

Mailer’s hipster psychopath character, described in his essay “The White Negro” is represented here by two crazed bikers, Popcorn (Rip Torn) and Grah (Michael McClure), who are accused of a hit and run. There is also a gambler accused of running illegal games. Dostoevsky himself liked to gamble and his novella *The Gambler* describes several characters who succumb to the temptation, Mailer’s main protagonist in *The Deer Park* conned his way into Hollywood society using his winnings from a poker game. There is a man who has been caught soliciting in a men’s restroom, homosexuality Michael R. Katz argues, plays an important role in *The House of the Dead*, *Notes from Underground* and *The Brothers Karamazov*.⁶ There’s an accused child molester, a crime committed in Dostoevsky’s work by Nikolai Stavrogin in *Demons*, Arkady Svidrigailov in *Crime and Punishment* and discussed by characters in several other stories. There is an ex-con imprisoned for rape and now accused again and there are also thieves and armed robbers, all crimes familiar throughout Dostoevsky’s work.

A key group of characters in the film are a husband and wife pornography team and several prostitutes accused of operating a “whipping club.” Detectives question the husband and wife and one of the prostitutes Lee Ray Rogers (Lee Roscoe), is singled out for interrogation by Lieutenant Pope. Later in the film, after Pope’s wife Mary Pope (Beverly Bentley) informs him she is having an affair, he meets the prostitute for a drink, breaking up the double date of his colleagues in the restaurant. Pope then reveals his intentions to “become corrupt.” In the released version of the film

Pope's wife then turns up, chases the prostitute away and he comes back from the edge of sin. In the *Blue* version things get much darker resulting in Pope murdering Rogers. The character of the prostitute appears throughout Dostoevsky's work and the redemption of vice is a recurring motif. Caitlin Charette explains that this ties in with Dostoevsky's Christian belief in the "saving power of love through suffering and self sacrifice."⁷ Most famously, in *Crime and Punishment* the fallen woman Sonia Marmeladov is a moral agent of change.⁸ Raskolnikov confesses his sins to her and she leads him to redemption by encouraging him to hand himself in to the police. Perhaps though, the character of Lee Ray Rogers is more like the prostitute Liza in *Notes from Underground*. She presents salvation to the Underground Man but he insults and humiliates her as Pope does to Rogers in the released version of the film. The *Blue* version however presents a much more complex and twisted sequence of events.

The two films diverge in the final scene, in *Blue* Lee Ray Rogers leaves the restaurant, goes home and performs a candlelit ritual, described in Mailer's notes as "demonic activity, frightening,"⁹ which lures the cops to her house. They arrive, she has sex with Berk whilst Gibraltar takes Polaroids, the men then leave and take the pornographic pictures to the bar and show Pope. He decides to confront Rogers, he turns up at her house with the Polaroids, she calms him down, they undress and crouch, looking at each other. Pope then makes a shocking move and kicks her in the face. She screams "You're a devil. You're a devil!"¹⁰ The next shot shows Rogers dead on the floor smeared in blood then Pope rubs some of the blood on his own face, making a Hitler style moustache as he stares down the camera lens.

Blood is a very evocative visual symbol and has been used in religious initiation ceremonies throughout history. The Christian connotations of the crucifixion of Christ and the redemption of man through the Eucharist and the symbolic drinking of Christ's blood had an influence on Dostoevsky's work. In *Crime and Punishment* vivid descriptions of blood underpin many important scenes and the spilling of blood and indeed "smearing his hand and the axe in the blood"¹¹ as he robs the old pawnbroker serves as Raskolnikov's first initiation into evil.¹² In his analysis of the film Kenneth Jurkiewicz states: "Pope has destroyed evil by collaborating with it."¹³ This refers back to an earlier scene in the film when Pope is interrogating Rogers. He questions her on her motivations stating: "people engage evil for several reasons. They engage evil in order to defeat it. They engage evil in order to collaborate with it. And they engage evil because they are apathetic about it." This is a pivotal Dostoevskian moment in the film. Dostoevsky's existential inquiry into the nature of evil runs throughout his work and "the problem of evil" is thoroughly examined in *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Beyond the Law: Motive

What motivated Mailer to create this Dostoevskian drama? At the film's world premiere Mailer explained his aim, stating: "The picture attempts to deal for the first time with the relations between police and criminals as a matter which is primarily human, existential, even spiritual, rather than legal or sociological."¹⁴ Both Mailer and Dostoevsky used their work to explore theology, philosophy and psychology. They question morality, corruption in society and try to understand the criminal mind. Underneath all of this is an exploration of human nature and a dialectic that could be described as "a mediation between good and evil"¹⁵ as Patrick Lyall Bourgeois describes Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*.

The theme of religion and its relationship to good and evil is explored throughout the film. The Jewish Norman Mailer casts himself as the Irish Catholic Lieutenant Francis Xavier Pope, a particularly Catholic name. Mailer explains this choice: “If I were playing a Jewish detective, I could never indulge in the kind of language that Pope indulges. . . . As an Irishman I can have moral conversations with my prisoners that I could never have if I was any other kind of detective.”¹⁶ Discussions in the film often refer to God and during one of the interrogations Lt. Pope snarls “God and asshole are the essence of criminality. You mix the two [and it] is the beginning of all evil.” Mailer’s relationship to religion has been described as “idiosyncratic.”¹⁷ In the 2007 book *On God: An Uncommon Conversation*, Mailer identifies as Jewish and states: “I have spent the last 50 years trying to contemplate the nature of God . . . my pride in the initial 30 odd years of my life was to be an atheist. . . . It took a good number of years to recognize that I did believe in God.”¹⁸ As a novelist he believed that “the best of us spend our lives exploring what might be human reality.”¹⁹ This theological inquiry is where his work again echoes that of Dostoevsky, whose beliefs were based in Orthodox Christianity but as Aileen Kelly suggests, his position was somewhere between the Christian and the humanist and he was “forced by events constantly to reassess his position.”²⁰ In his biography of Dostoevsky Joseph Frank explains: “Dostoevsky was to say later that the problem of the existence of God had tormented him all his life; but this only confirms that it was always emotionally impossible for him to accept a world that had no relation to a God of any kind.”²¹ He explored his beliefs through writing and a strong morality shaped all of his work. Dostoevsky has been accused of anti-Semitism²² and *A Writer’s Diary* displays some shameful opinions. However, his earlier work shows none of these tendencies and Gary Rosenshield goes as far as to suggest that Dostoevsky identified with the Jewish character of Isay Fomich in *The House of the Dead* as a fellow outsider as he presents the character with so many similarities to the narrator.²³

Mailer grappled with philosophy and psychoanalytical questions throughout his career. In the essay *Mailer: The Jew as Existentialist* Paul B. Newman discusses Mailer’s “philosophy of the hipster”²⁴ and explores the particular style of existentialism throughout his work. He compares the story in Mailer’s *An American Dream* to *Crime and Punishment* “but stripped of the profound concern that made Dostoevsky’s work a masterpiece.”²⁵ Mailer discussed existentialism in many interviews stating in 1970: “I’m an existentialist, through and through and through.”²⁶ However his version of existentialism differs greatly from the atheistic existentialist philosophers like Jean-Paul Sartre. Mailer explains: “I’m an existentialist who believes there is a God and a Devil at war with one another. Like Sartre in his atheism, I offer a statement of absolute certainty equally founded on the inability to verify it.”²⁷ Mailer’s existentialism seems to be defined in the possibilities of a situation and that in that moment we exist without knowing what the outcomes may be.

Interestingly Joseph Roddy in 1969 refers to a talk Mailer gave where he discussed the overlaps between his existentialism and Catholicism.²⁸ To refer to Dostoevsky as an existentialist is also problematic as Bourgeois points out because existentialism as a specific philosophy of existence did not develop until the twentieth century. He concurs with the commonly held thought that existential philosophy has its roots in the nineteenth century writings of Soren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche and Fyodor Dostoevsky but he argues that this is as far as Dostoevsky’s existentialism goes. He suggests that the commonality is because, as in the philosophy of existence, Dostoevsky’s philosophy of man “focuses on human existence in the attempt to bring forth a fuller treatment of the whole man.”²⁹

At the core of Mailer and Dostoevsky’s philosophy are questions regarding the duality of man and the nature of criminality. Regarding *Beyond the Law* Mailer stated that: “Everyone alive has both personalities within themselves. All of us are policemen, all of us are criminals.”³⁰ The film

allowed him to explore this idea by casting his friends in roles as cops or criminals and letting them improvise. This turned out to be as much social experiment as film-making technique and Mailer was surprised by their reactions: "what was extraordinary to me was the way they took to the roles. There was a tremendous amount of animosity . . . between people who were normally good friends and got along well."³¹ The contrast of cop and criminal is an extension of the relationship between saint and psychopath that he explored throughout his career. In his 1954–55 journal Mailer put much thought into trying to understand the relationship between the two. In over 40 entries on the subject he relates the saint and the psychopath to religion, the soul, the hipster, society, politics, psychoanalysis, the genius, cops and crooks, prison, sin, Stalinists and reflections on his work, his relationships and himself. It makes for fascinating reading, his observations demonstrate the basis of his philosophy and show what led him to make *Beyond the Law* years later. He believed "the psychopath is close to the saint . . . the saint turned inside out,"³² "Each are alone, each are honest."³³ "In the saint-psychopath sense, all of human history is the story of the movement from psychopath (giver) to saint (taker)."³⁴ "So in that sense I am the rational saint sent out to find the good in monsters and psychopaths."³⁵

Dostoevsky also believed in the inherent good in all men. He stated in his published diary: "we are all good people—apart from the bad ones of course. But let me remark in passing that there may be no bad people among us at all, but only some useless ones."³⁶ He too talked of saints and depicted saintly characters such as Alyosha in *The Brothers Karamazov* alongside his criminals. In his diary he stated: "not all of the people are villains; there are true saints, and what saints they are: they are radiant and illuminate the way for us all!"³⁷ Dostoevsky shared Mailer's creative interest in the psychology of the criminal, as Paul Chatham Squires discusses, the problem of Raskolnikov was Dostoevsky's major exploration of the criminal mind and his attempt to understand the reasoning of the psychopath.³⁸ He also cites *Notes From Underground* as Dostoevsky's "great essay on the human will and the psychological principles of inferiority"³⁹ and refers to the "astounding psychological subtleties"⁴⁰ of Dmitri Karamazov's trial for parricide in *The Brothers Karamazov*. The criminal mind is also explored through several different characters in the Siberian prison of *The House of the Dead*.

The police station scenario allows Mailer to explore society, the state and its power, corruption and violence. These themes recur in his work and are most thoroughly explored in the military scenario of *The Naked and The Dead*. In the *Beyond the Law* line-up the guilty and the innocent are represented and both receive the same harsh treatment. The suspects demand to see their lawyers but the cops repeatedly deny them their rights. Mailer often spoke critically of the contradictions of capitalist American society and its flawed justice system leading to him being branded a communist and tracked by the FBI for 15 years.⁴¹ In his 1954–55 journal he comments on police corruption: "The FBI is just swept with the psychology of secret policemen who project onto the enemy their own enormous criminality,"⁴² also observing that "the sadistic cop is the criminal reversed."⁴³

Dostoevsky was critical of nineteenth-century Russian society and he explored the state's misuse of power in depth in *The Grand Inquisitor* section of *The Brothers Karamazov*. Described as one of Dostoevsky's great polyphonic novels⁴⁴ there have been many different readings of this tale but at its core it explores institutional power, corruption and manipulation. Russian justice is also questioned in the book during Dmitri Karamazov's trial and *The House of the Dead* exposes the cruelty and violence of the state against its prisoners. Dostoevsky joined the socio-Christian Petrashevsky Circle, a group who met to discuss the abolition of censorship and other social reforms. In 1849 Dostoevsky and the other members of the group were arrested as revolutionaries.



Figure 6.2 Actor Rip Torn as Popcorn in Norman Mailer's *Beyond the Law* (1968). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

He narrowly escaped the death sentence and was instead sent to Siberia for four years of hard labor in a prison camp.

The influence of Dostoevsky though wasn't just as part of a literary homage, Mailer was also philosophically and spiritually influenced by his life. Dostoevsky and Mailer both followed real criminal cases and blurred the line between life and literature. Dostoevsky wrote several articles in *A Writer's Diary* about Ekatarina Kornilova, accused of throwing her step-daughter out of a fourth story window. With his influence her conviction was overturned and she was later acquitted. He visited her in prison and at home with her husband after she was released. Norman Mailer became involved with the case of Jack Abbott, a repeat offender who had been in and out of prison since a young age. Mailer believed him to be a misunderstood genius and he championed his writing ability.

When Mailer was working on *The Executioner's Song* he corresponded with Abbott who helped him with information relevant to the book. When Abbott came up for parole Mailer assured the parole board that he had a job for him and he was released on June 5, 1981. Mailer helped Abbott get a book deal and the pair met regularly and gave interviews to the media, but within two weeks of his release Abbott fatally stabbed a waiter and was convicted of first degree manslaughter. Gary Rosenshield compares Dostoevsky's belief in redemption and his support of Kornilova with Norman Mailer's similar redemptive ideas and support of Jack Abbott, though Mailer was later to concede that he had made a mistake with Abbott.⁴⁵

Beyond the Law: Redemption

How do we re-evaluate *Beyond the Law*? Where does it sit in the Mailer cannon? What is its legacy? Can it be redeemed? Considering the film's variety of morally charged characters, its ambitious themes, and its multi-dimensional narrative gives a deeper understanding of the film's layered meanings and a clearer insight into the film-maker's motivations. Examining the influence of Dostoevsky on Mailer, his work and his personal philosophy underlines the relevance of the film, its aim of moral exploration and its dialectic between good and evil.

Mailer's depiction of criminals and his exploration of justice can be related to his literary work *The Executioner's Song* and his analysis of the psychopathic personality echoes his essay "The White Negro." In *The Naked and the Dead* and in *An American Dream* Mailer explores existential ideas with clear reference to Dostoevsky through the narrative and characters, and society and morality is critiqued in *The Deer Park*. Alongside his other cinematic work, *Beyond the Law* can be seen to develop further the study of the psychopathic criminal mind in *Wild 90* (1968) and as a precursor to the corruption and abuses of power demonstrated in *Maidstone* (1970).

The legacy of *Beyond the Law* also echoes through several contemporary films, particularly Abel Ferrara's *Bad Lieutenant* (1993). Michael Chaiken recalls: "Norman did tell me that when he saw that movie *Bad Lieutenant* . . . it's right out of *Beyond the Law-Blue* in terms of this kind of sinister, wicked life of a Police Chief."⁴⁶ In *Bad Lieutenant*, the ultimate study of a crooked cop, religion and sin are laid bare and forgiveness and redemption are excruciatingly presented. There are many similarities to *Beyond the Law*, both films depict the dark side of law enforcement and further Dostoevsky's moral inquiry into the psyche of the criminal and institutional corruption. The journey for both protagonists culminates in a moral crisis and a Raskolnikov-like spiral toward evil. Nicole Brenez compares *Bad Lieutenant*'s Hegelian dialectic to Dostoevsky's negative novelistic version.⁴⁷ Much of Ferrara's other work also explores Dostoevskian themes and morality. The writer of Ferrara's *Fear City* (1984) comments that the film's serial killer character Pazzo (John Foster) has three books in his room including Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. He explains that he was supposed to be portrayed as "a killer, but he's also the flower of philosophy. The character proves that God is dead. The amoralist world has arisen."⁴⁸

In re-evaluating *Beyond The Law* and considering its ambitious Dostoevskian inquiry, a new appreciation for its depth and purpose can be gained. In an interview published in 1985 the respected avant-garde film-maker, poet and artist Jonas Mekas discusses 1960s independent cinema, Norman Mailer and Andy Warhol. He states: "I think Norman's films are the most underestimated and most neglected independently made films."⁴⁹ *Beyond the Law* is certainly deserving of more attention. Mailer stated that his "idea for a proper audience . . . is not intellectual at all, because I don't think it's an intellectual film."⁵⁰ But perhaps on this Mailer is wrong and a literary, intellectual viewing of the film can redeem and resurrect it. *Beyond the Law* should be counted alongside Mailer's other significant accomplishments as it certainly achieves what he hoped for his work: to "carry what . . . [Dostoevsky] had to tell another part of the way."⁵¹

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7

A COURSE IN FILM-MAKING

Norman Mailer

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1. On the theory

The company, jaded and exhausted, happily or unhappily sexed-out after five days and nights of movie-making and balling in midnight beds and pools, had been converted to a bunch of enforced existentialists by the making of the film. There is no other philosophical word which will apply to the condition of being an actor who has never acted before, finding himself in a strange place with a thoroughgoing swap of strangers and familiars for bedfellows, no script, and a story which suggests that the leading man is a fit and appropriate target for assassination. Since many of the actors were not without their freaks, their kinks, or old clarion calls to violence, and since the word of the Collective Rumor was that more than one of the men was packing a piece, a real piece with bullets, these five days and nights had been the advanced course in existentialism. Nobody knew what was going to happen, but for one hundred and twenty hours the conviction had been growing that if the warning system of one's senses had been worth anything in the past, something was most certainly going to happen before the film was out. Indeed on several separate occasions, it seemed nearly to happen. A dwarf almost drowned in a pool, a fight had taken place, then a bad fight, and on the night before at a climactic party two hours of the most intense potential for violence had been filmed, yet nothing commensurate had happened. The company was now in that state of hangover, breath foul with swallowed curses and congestions of the instincts, which comes to prize-fight fans when a big night, long awaited, ends as a lackluster and lumbering waltz. Not that the party had been a failure while it was being filmed. The tension of the party was memorable in the experience of many. But, finally, nothing happened.

So, at this point next day in the filming of *Maidstone*, on the lazy afternoon which followed the night of the party, the director had come to the erroneous conclusion his movie was done—even though the film was still continuing in the collective mind of some working photographers before whom the director was yet to get hit on the head by a hammer wielded by his best actor, and would respond by biting the best actor on the ear, a fight to give him a whole new conception of his movie. What a pity to remind ourselves of these violent facts, for they encourage interest in a narrative which will not be presented in a hurry and then only a little, and that after an inquiry into

the director's real interest which is (less bloody and more philosophical) the possible real nature of film—not an easy discussion since the director has already found a most special way of making movies. When he begins to discourse on the subject, he feels as if he is not so much a director as an Argument. He can literally think of himself as The Argument, some medieval wind—a Player who is there for harangue. Certainly in that precise hour of the afternoon when he took off his actor's cape and moved from Norman T. Kingsley back to Norman Mailer again, and gave an orientation on the grass of Gardiners Island, it could hardly be said that he failed to talk about his movie to the company. No, he made every effort, even went so far as to explain that his way of making films was analogous to a military operation, to a commando raid on the nature of reality—they would discover where reality was located by the attack itself, just as a company of Rangers might learn that the enemy was located not in the first town they invaded but another. Of course, even as he spoke, he felt the resumption of tension. There was still something wrong in the air. The picture, he could swear, but for some fill-in, was finished, yet the presence it created had not left.

He could, however, hardly complain if the film itself was still a *presence*. A condition of dread had been generated over the last five days which had put subtle terror and tension into the faces of people who had never acted before, lines of such delicate intent and fine signification as to draw the envy of professionals. That had been precisely the presence he wished to elicit. It was the fundament of his method, the heart of his confidence, to put untried actors into situations without



Figure 7.1 Rip Torn, Norman Mailer, and Michael McClure stand as orators at the “Grand Assassination Ball” in *Maidstone* (1970). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

a script and film them with simple or available lighting, work in the limitations of these means and unforeseen ends and exits to get the best available sound (which was not always near to superb), and yet, all limitations granted, he could by this method give a sense of the bewildering surface of his cinematic reality which was finer by far than the work of all but the very best film artists.

It was in other words, a Leviathan of a thesis, and he, with characteristic modesty, ignorant until a few years ago of nearly all to do with film-making, and still technically more ignorant than the good majority of mediocre directors, was still convinced he had wandered by easy progressions into a most complex and devilish way of working up a film. And now had the confidence he was a film maker. And the unique experience to convince himself that he was a pioneer, for he believed he had come upon a way to smash the machine which crushed every surface of cinematic reality, that organization of plot, dialogue, sets, professionals, schedules, and thundering union impedimenta which beat every effort to take a good story or a book and flesh it into movie film. No, something was wrong with that, something was dreadfully wrong with a process which wasted time, talent, and millions of dollars at a crack to produce cinematic works of the most predictable encapsulation. One could sit through such works and on rare occasion even enjoy a world of good taste and nice insight without ever a moment of sensuous discomfort, which was exactly equal to saying without a moment of aesthetic revelation.

Still it is something to skip at a leap over thirty years of movie-making apprenticeship he has not served, to propose that, all ignorance and limitations granted, he has found a novel technique, and is on the consequence ready to issue a claim that his way of putting a film together, cut by cut, is important, and conceivably closer to the nature of film than the work of other, more talented directors.

2.

Of course, he makes no second claim that technically, gymnastically, pyrotechnically, or by any complex measure of craft does he begin to know the secrets of the more virtuoso of the directors and the cutters, no, he would only say that the material he has filmed lends itself happily, even innocently, to whole new ways of making cuts. That is because it has captured the life it was supposed to photograph. He is unfolding no blueprint. So there tends to be less monotony to his composition, less of a necessity to have over-illuminated and too simplified frames, less of a push to give a single emphasis to each scene. His lines of dramatic force are not always converging toward the same point—nobody in his frame has yet learned to look for the reaction of the hero after the villain insults him, no, his film is not diminished by supporting actors who are forever obliged to indicate what the point of the scene is supposed to be (and are thereby reminiscent of dutiful relatives at a family dinner). So, his movie is not reminiscent of other films where the scene—no matter how superb—has a hollow, not so pervasive perhaps as the cheerful hollow in the voices of visitors who have come to be cheerful to a patient in a hospital, but there, even in the best of films always there. In the worst of films it is like the cordiality at the reception desk in a mortician's manor. So it could even be said that professional movie-acting consists of the ability to reduce the hollow to an all but invisible hole, and one can measure such actors by their ability to transcend the hollow. Marion Brando could go "Wow" in *Waterfront* and Dustin Hoffman would limp to the kitchen sink in *Midnight Cowboy* and the lack of life in the conventional movie frame was replaced by magical life. One could speak with justice of great actors. Perhaps a thousand actors and two thousand

films can be cited where the movie frame comes alive and there is no dip at the foot of consciousness because something is false at the root.

Nonetheless any such appearance of talent was close to magic. The conventional way of making most films usually guaranteed its absence. For there was an element which interfered with motion pictures as much as the blurring of print would hinder the reading of a book, and this flaw derived from the peculiar misapprehension with which the silent film gave way to sound, the supposition that sound-and-film was but an extension of the theatre, even as the theatre was but an extension of literature. It was assumed that movies were there to tell a story. The story might derive from the stage, or from the pages of a book, or even from an idea for a story, but the film was asked to issue from a detailed plan which would have lines of dialogue. The making of the movie would be a fulfillment of that script, that literary plan; so, each scene would be shaped like a construction unit to build the architecture of the story. It was one of those profoundly false assumptions which seem at the time absolute common sense, yet it was no more natural than to have insisted that a movie was a river and one should always experience, while watching a film, emotions analogous to an afternoon spent on the banks of a stream. That might have been seen instantly as confining, a most confining notion; but to consider the carry-over of the story from literature to the film as equally constricting—no, that was not very evident.

For few people wished to contemplate the size of the job in transporting a novelist's vision of life over to a film; indeed, who in the movie business was going to admit that once literary characters had been converted over to actors, they could not possibly produce the same relation to other actors that the characters once had to each other? Interpretations had to collide. If each actor had his own idea of the dialogue he committed to memory, be certain the director had a better idea. And the producer! Lifetimes of professional craft go into halving such conceptual differences. The director gives up a little of his interpretation, then a little more, then almost all of it. The actor is directed away from his favorite misconceptions (and conceptions). Both parties suffer the rigor mortis of the technical conditions—which are not so close to a brightly lit operating theatre as to a brightly lit morgue. Then the scriptwriter has dependably delivered the scenario with his own private—and sometimes willful idea—buried in it (and if the work is an adaptation, odd lines of the novelist are still turning over). The coherence of the original novel has been cremated and strewn. Now the film is being made with conflicting notions of those scattered ashes. Of course the director is forced back willy-nilly to his script. It is all he can finally depend upon. Given the fundamental, nay, even organic, confusion on a movie set over what everybody is really doing, the company has to pool all differences and be faithful to the script even when the script has lost any relation to the original conception, and has probably begun to constrict the real life which is beginning to emerge on the set. No wonder great novels invariably make the most disappointing movies, and modest novels (like *The Asphalt Jungle*) sometimes make very good movies. It is because the original conception in modest novels is less special and so more capable of being worked upon by any number of other writers, directors, and actors.

Still, the discussion has been too narrow. The film, after all, is fed not only by literature but by the theatre, and the theatre is a conspicuous example of how attractively a blueprint can be unfolded. In fact, the theatre is reduced to very little whenever the collaboration between actors and script is not excellent. Yet the theatre has had to put up with many a similar difficulty. Can it be said that something works in the theatre which only pretends to work in the film? If the first error perpetrated upon movies has been to see them as an adjunct of literature, perhaps the second is the rush to make film an auxiliary of the theatrical arts, until even movies considered classics are hardly more than pieces of filmed theatre.

Of course a film lover could counter by saying that he was not necessarily thinking only of such monuments as *Gone with the Wind* when he used the term classic. In fact, he would inquire about *A Night at the Opera* or *The Maltese Falcon*.

The difficulties had obviously begun. The Argument would be never so simple again. The Marx Brothers, for example, stampeded over every line of a script and tore off in enough directions to leave concepts fluttering like ticker tape on the mysterious nature of the movie art. Certainly, any attempt to declare *The Maltese Falcon* a piece of filmed theatre would have to confess that *The Maltese Falcon* was more, a mysterious ineffable possession of “more” and that was precisely what one looked for in a film. It was a hint to indicate some answer to the secrets of film might begin to be found in the curious and never quite explained phenomenon of the movie star. For Humphrey Bogart was certainly an element of natural film, yes, even the element which made *The Maltese Falcon* more than an excellent piece of filmed theatre. Thinking of the evocative aesthetic mists of that movie, how could the question not present itself why did every piece of good dramatic theatre have to be the enemy of the film? It was unhappily evident to The Argument that any quick and invigorating theses on the character of movie stars and the hidden nature of the movie might have to wait for a little exposition on the special qualities of theatre.

3.

A complex matter. You might, for instance, have to take into account why people who think it comfortable to be nicely drunk at the beginning of a play would find it no pleasure to go to a movie in the same condition. Pot was more congenial for a film. If the difference for most hard-working actors between movies and theatre seemed hardly more than a trip across a crack, the split to any philosopher of the film was an abyss, just that same existential abyss which lies between booze and the beginnings of the psychedelic.

Existentially, theatre and film were in different dominions (and literature was probably nearer to each of them than they were to each other). The theatre was a ceremony with live priests who had learned by rote to pool their aesthetic instincts for a larger purpose. So theatre partook of a near obscene ceremony: it imitated life in a living place, and it had real people as the imitators. Such imitation was either sacrilege to the roots of life, or a reinforcement of them. Certainly, sentiments called religious appeared ready to arise whenever a group of people attended a ceremony in a large and dimly lit place. But in fact anyone who has ever experienced a moment of unmistakable balance between the audience, the cast, the theatre and the *manifest* of the play, an awe usually remarked by a silence palpable as the theatrical velvet of an unvoiced echo, knows that the foundation of the theatre is in the church and in the power of kings, or at least knows (if theatre goes back to blood sacrifices performed in a cave—which is about where the most advanced theatre seems ready to go) that the more recent foundations were ecclesiastical and royal.

Theatre, at all of its massive best, can be seen as equal to a ceremony, performed by noblemen who have power to chastise an audience, savage them, dignify them, warm them, marry their humors, even create a magical forest where each human on his seat is a tree and every sense is vibrating to the rustle of other leaves. One's roots return then to some lost majesty of pomp and power.

Of course, theatre is seldom so good. None of us have had a night like that recently. Still, theatre has its minutes: a scene whose original concept was lost in the mixing of too many talents is



Figure 7.2 Norman Mailer and Carol Stevens—lost loves—sing and interact with each other in *Maidstone* (1970). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

recovered by the power of the actor to open relations with his audience. While he is engaged in an emotional transaction which is false by its nature (because he knows by heart the lines of apparently spontaneous passion he will say next), still he has to be true to the honest difficulty of not knowing whether the audience will believe him or not. His position on stage is existential—he cannot know in advance if his effort will succeed or not. In turn, the audience must respect him. For he is at the least brave enough to dare their displeasure. And if he is bad enough . . . well, how can he forget old nightmares where audiences kill actors? So the actor on stage is at once a fraud (because he pretends to emotion he cannot by any Method feel absolutely—*or he would be mad*) and yet is a true man engaged in a tricky venture, dangerous in its potentialities for humiliation. That is the strength of the theatre. A vision of life somewhat different each night comes into existence between the actors and the audience, and what has been lost in the playwright's vision is sometimes transcended by the mood of a high theatrical hearth.

We are speaking of course only of the best and freshest plays. Even in a good play something dies about the time an actor recognizes that he can be mediocre in his performance and survive. The reputation of the play has become so useful that the audience has become a touch mediocre as well; at this point in the season the actor inevitably becomes as interesting as a whore in a house after her favorite client has gone for the night.

Nonetheless, it is still reminiscent of orgy to have relations with two worlds of sentience at once, and when fresh, theatre is orgy. On stage, the actor is in communion with the audience and up to his neck in relations with other actors (if they are all still working together). A world of technique

supports them. There are ways and means to live and act with half-thought-out lines of dialogue and errors of placement by the director, ways to deal with sentiments which have no ring and situations one knows by heart and still must enter with a pretense of theatrical surprise. An actor's culture exists, after all, for the working up of the false into the all-but-true; actors know the audience will carry the all-but-true over into the real and emotionally stirring if given a chance. So actors develop a full organ of emotional manifests. Large vibrant voices, significant moves. It all works because the actor is literally alive on a stage and therefore can never be false altogether. His presence is the real truth: he is at once the royal center of all eyes, and a Christian up before lions. So his theatrical emotion (which bears the same relation to real emotion which veneer of walnut bears to walnut) is moved by the risk of his position into a technique which offers truth. A skillful actor with false gestures and false emotions elicits our admiration because he tries to establish a vault under which we can seize on the truth since, after all, he has told the lie so well. Why, then, must that be an emotional transaction light years of the psyche away from the same transaction carried over to film?

4.

It is because the risk in film is of other varieties. No audience is present unless the actor plays his scene for the cameramen and the union grips. And that is a specific audience with the prejudices and tastes of policemen. Indeed they usually dress like cops off duty and are built like cops (with the same heavy meat in the shoulders, same bellies oiled on beer), which is not surprising for they are also in surveillance upon a criminal activity: people are forging emotions under bright lights.

But it is no longer false emotion brought by technique to a point where it can be breathed upon and given life by audiences who do not know the next line. No, now the crew is a set of skills and intelligences. They are as sophisticated to the lines of the scene as the actors themselves. Like cops they see through every fake move and hardly care. The camera must move on cue and the sound boom, the lights be shifted and the walls slid apart—the action is easily as complex as a professional football team running through the intricacies of a new play or preparing a defense against it.

In fact, the actor does not usually play for the technicians. It is the director whose intelligence he will feel first, a charged critical intelligence knowing more of the scene than himself, a center of authority altogether different from a theatrical audience's authority (which is ready to relax with every good sound the actor makes). The movie director, however, does not relax then. The good sound of the actor can turn the plot inside out. No, here, the actor must work into a focus of will. The real face he speaks to, whether a step or ten steps to the side of the director, is a circle of glass as empty of love as an empty glass. That lens is his final audience. It takes precedence over the director and even over the actors he plays with. In the moment of his profoundest passion, as he reaches forward to kiss the heroine with every tenderness, his lips to be famous for their quiver, he is of course slowly and proficiently bringing his mouth up to the erogenous zone of the lens.

On stage, an actor, after twenty years of apprenticeship, can learn to reach the depths of an audience at the moment he is employing the maximum of his technique. A film actor with equivalent technique will have developed superb skills for revealing his reaction to the circle of glass. He can fail every other way, disobey the director or appear incapable of reacting to his direction, leave the other actors isolated from him and with nothing to react to, he can even get his lines wrong, but if

he has film technique he will look sensational in the rushes, he will bring life to the scene even if he was death on the set. It is not surprising. There is something sinister about film.

Film is a phenomenon whose resemblance to death has been ignored for too long. An emotion produced from the churn of the flesh is delivered to a machine, and that machine and its connections manage to produce a flow of images which will arouse some related sentiment in those who watch. The living emotion has passed through a burial ground—and has been resurrected. The living emotion survives as a psychological reality; it continues to exist as a set of images in one's memory which are not too different, as the years go by, from the images we keep of a relative who is dead. Think of a favorite uncle who is gone. Does the apparatus of the mind which flashes his picture before us act in another fashion if we ask for a flash of Humphrey Bogart next? Perhaps it does not.

Film seems part of the mechanism of memory, or at the least, a most peculiar annex to memory. For in film we remember events as if they had taken place and we were there. But we were not. The psyche has taken into itself a whole country of fantasy and made it psychologically real, made it a part of memory. We are obviously dealing with a phenomenon whose roots are less defined than the power and glory of king and church. Yes, movies are more mysterious than theatre; even a clue to the undefinable attraction of the movie star is that he remains a point of light in that measureless dark of memory where other scenes have given up their light. He has obviously become a center of meaning to millions, possessed of more meaning than the actor next to him who may be actually more attractive, more interesting—definition of the phenomenon frays as we try to touch it. But has the heart of the discussion been sounded? Does it suggest that movie stars partake of the mysterious psychic properties of film more than other actors? that something in them lends itself to the need of memory for images of the past one can refer to when the mind has need to comprehend something new before it? We have to be careful. It is perhaps not so simple as that. The movie star may also suggest obsession, that negative condition of memory, that painful place to which we return over and over because a fundamental question is still unresolved: something happened to us years ago which was important, yet we hardly know if an angel kissed us then or a witch, whether we were brave or timid. We return to the ambiguity with pain. The obsession hurts because we cannot resolve it and so are losing confidence in our ability to estimate the present.

Obsession is a wasteful fix. Memory, when it can be free of obsession, is a storehouse to offer up essences of the past capable of digesting most of the problems of the present, memory is even the libido of the ego, sweetening harsh demands of the will when memory is, yes, good. But the movie star seems to serve some double function: the star feeds memory *and* obsession—one need only think back to one's feelings about Marilyn Monroe! The movie star is welcoming but mysterious, unavailable yet intimate, the movie star is the embodiment of a love which could leave us abject, yet we believe we are the only soul the movie star can love. Quintessence of the elusive nature of film, the movie star is like a guide to bring us through the adventures of a half-conscious dream. It is even possible the movie star gives focus to themes of the imagination so large, romantic, and daring that they might not encounter reality: how can an adolescent have any real idea whether he will ever have sex with a beautiful woman or fight for his life? Nonetheless, events so grand might need years of psychic preparation. It was therefore also possible that the dream life of the film existed not only to provide escape but to prepare the psyche for apocalyptic moments which would likely never come.

Some differences of film from theatre may then have been noted. Theatre works on our ideas of social life and our understanding of manners. At its most generous, theatre creates a communion



Figure 7.3 Lady Jeanne Campbell as Jeanne Cardigan in *Maidstone* (1970). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

of—bodies and a savory of the emotions—it becomes a feast and a fuck. But film speaks to the lost islands of the mind. Film lives somewhere in that underground river of the psyche which travels from the domain of sex through the deeps of memory and the dream, on out into the possible montages of death—we need only think of any man who was rescued from drowning after he thought he was on the last trip down. Does he ever relate the experience without speaking of the sensation that his life became a film running backward? *It is as if film has an existence within the brain which may be comparable to memory and the dream*, be indeed as real as memory and the dream, be even to some degree as functional. It was as if the levels of that existential river which runs into ultimate psychic states would no longer read as perhaps once it did: sex–memory–dream–death; but now flows through a technological age and so has to be described by way of sex–memory–film–dream–death.

Theatre has to be in the world of manners, but film is in the physiology of the psyche. For that reason, perhaps, film comes nearest to a religion as the movie houses are empty, it speaks across all the lonely traverses of the mind, it is at its most beautiful in precisely those places it is least concrete, least theatrical, most other-worldly, most ghostly, most lingering unto death—then the true experience of the film as some Atlantis of the Psyche will manifest itself, and directors like

Antonioni and Bergman will show us that the film inhabits a secret place where the past tense of memory and the future intimations of the dream are interchangeable, are partners in the film: there is an unmistakable quality to any film which is not made as filmed theatre but rather appears as some existence we call film.

That existence runs through Chaplin and *Sunset Boulevard* and *Persona*—it runs through home movies. It was Warhol's talent to perceive that in every home movie there is a sense of Time trying to express itself as a new kind of creation, a palpability which breathes in the being of the film. The best of works and some of the worst of film works have this quality. One can even find it for flashes in cranky old battered films of the purest mediocrity late at night on TV, B-films without an instant of talent, yet the years have added magic to what was once moronic—Time is winking her eye as we look at the film. Time suddenly appears to us as a wit.

Of course, there are movies which have delivered huge pleasures to millions and never were film at all, just celluloid theatre convertible to cash. Some were good, some very good, some awful, but the majority of motion pictures, particularly the majority of expensive ones, have always labored against the umbilical antipathy of film for theatre. They were, no matter how good as filmed theatre, never equal to theatre at its best—rather, scaled-down repasts for the eye and ear. They had a kind of phlegmatic tempo and all-too-well-lit color which rarely hindered them from reaching lists for the Ten Best Pictures of the year. They were pictures like *Oklahoma!*, *South Pacific*, *The Sound of Music*, *Mary Poppins*, and *The Best Years of Our Lives*. They were even such critical favorites as *Marty*, *Born Yesterday*, *Brief Encounter*, and *The Seven Year Itch*, or *Anne of the Thousand Days*, add *Lust for Life*, *All About Eve*, *Around the World in Eighty Days*, *West Side Story*.

All that celluloid was super-technique for audiences who had not necessarily ever seen a play but were constantly nourished in the great cafeteria of the American Aesthetic where the media meals were served up as binder for the shattered nervous system of the masses. To the owners of that cafeteria there was something obscene in the idea that one should not be able to translate a book into a play, film, or TV series—something arrogant, for it would say the difference between the movies just named and films like *Zabriskie Point*, *M.A. S.H.*, *Naked Summer*, *Belle de Jour*, *Limelight*, *Diabolique*, *8 1/2*, *The Bicycle Thief*, *The Four Hundred Blows*, *High Noon*, *Easy Rider*, and *Weekend* were as the difference between crud and sustenance for that ghostly part of the psyche the film was supposed to enrich.

5.

Very well. He had his point at least. There was film and filmed theatre; there were relatively pure movies, and there were money-making motion pictures which had almost nothing to do with movies or memory or dream, but were filmed circus for the suckers who proceeded to enjoy them enormously (when they did—for some cost canyons of cash and brought back trickles), suckers who loved them for their binding glue, and the status of seeing them, and the easy massage such pictures gave to emotions real theatre might have satisfied more. These motion pictures, made for no motive more in focus than the desire for money, were derived from plays, or were written and directed as filmed plays, they composed three-quarters to nine-tenths of the motion pictures which were made, and they might yet be the terminal death of Hollywood for they were color television on enormous screens and so failed more often than they succeeded; the media were mixed so the messages were mixed—audiences tended to regard them with apathy.

Of course the films he loved were just as often watched in empty theatres, but if he would call upon the difference it was that they were not regarded in apathy but in subtle fear or mixed pleasure or with gloom or dread or the kind of fascination which hinted uncomfortably at future obsession. There was a quality he could almost lay his hands on in movies he admired and so would raise to the superior eminence of Film: they were experiences which were later as pure in recollection as splendid or tragic days in one's life, they were not unlike the memory of some modest love which did not survive but was tender in retrospect for now it lived with the dignity of old love. Such films changed as one remembered them since they had become part of one's psychological life. Like love, they partook a little of some miracle, they had emerged from the abominable limitations of the script, yes, they had emerged out of some mysterious but wholly agreeable lack of focus toward that script in the intent of the director and/or the actor, they were subtly attached to a creative mist, they had the ambiguity of film.

For if filmed theatre could sometimes be effective, sometimes be even as perfect and deserving of admiration as *Midnight Cowboy* or *On the Waterfront*, such pictures still had their aesthetic fired by the simpler communication of the theatre where relations between actors usually produced a dramatic outcome as capable of definition as the last line of a family fight. "Go to an analyst" turned out to be the message, or "Lover, we'll get along," or "God bless us, we're unhappy, but we'll stick for the kids." If it is theatre so rich as *The Little Foxes*, it will say, "I am prepared to kill you, and I will." Since the need of a stage actor is to draw an audience together, his instinct is to simplify the play and concentrate it, give it a single crisp flavor. So theatre speaks. Powerfully or with banality, comically, or in the botch of hysteria, it speaks, secretly it almost always speaks vulgarly, for almost always it says, "We're here to tell you something about life. We've got a piece of the meat for you." Of course if it is bad theatre, conceived in advance as a television series or any other form of Cafeteria, then it is only there to tell you something about public opinion and how that works at the lowest common denominator. But good or bad, theatre functions at its simple best when every resonance of the evening can collect about a single point that—place where the actors seduced the audience to meet the play.

Film, however, is shown to audiences who do not often react together. Some laugh, while others are silent, some are bored. Few share the same time. They have come in on the movie at different places. For film always speaks of death. Theatre rouses desires between the living audience and the living actors; film stirs suicide pacts where each individual in the audience goes over the horizon alone with the star; film speaks of the ambiguity of death—is it nothingness we go to, or eternal life? Is it to peace we travel or the migrations of the soul? So the ambiguity of the movie star is essential, and it helps to understand that subtle emptiness which is usually present in the colors of their acting, that pause in the certainty of what they would say, that note of distraction and sorrows on the other side of the hill, that hint they are thinking of a late date they will meet after this guy is gone. Movie stars are caught in the complexity of the plot but they do not belong to it altogether, as stage actors do. It does not matter of whom we speak: whether it is Garbo or Harlow or Marilyn Monroe, Carole Lombard or Myrna Loy, even Dottie Lamour or Grable, the star is still one misty wink of the eye away from total absorption. Even Cagney, phallic as a column of rock, had the hint of bells ringing in his head from blows some big brother gave him in years gone by, and Gable's growling voice always seemed to hint at one big hunk of other business he would have to take care of in a little while. The charisma of the movie star spoke of associations with tangential thoughts, with dissipations of the story-point into ripples which went out wider and wider, out to the shores of some land only the waves of the movies could wash.

Now, much of that was gone. There were still stars, even in color film there were bona fide stars. There was Catherine Deneuve and Robert Redford and huge box-office familiars predictable as the neighbor next door and twice as vivid—Bob Hope and Lucille Ball for two. If film spoke of death, motion-pictures-for-money spoke of everything which was boring, unkillable, and bouncy, and could be stopped with a switch quick as TV, and was by couples necking in drive-in theatres. The film had also become brands of sex marked R, X, and Hard-Core, the film was epic documentaries like *Woodstock* and *Gimme Shelter*, the film was *Pound* and *Trash* and *Performance*, which some called great and some would not, the film was in transition, the film was in a place no one could name, and he was there with *Maidstone*, caught in the position of talking about a film made near to three years before.

Three years was a decade in the recent history of the film. Half of the shock in his sexual scenes was nearly as comfortable by now as the lingerie ads in a fashion magazine, and his emphasis on film without script was evident in small uses everywhere, it had begun for that matter as long ago as Cassavetes' *Shadows*, a film of the fifties he did not particularly remember, but then for that matter, film without script had begun with the two-reeler and the sequence of action worked out on the director's white starched cuff. It was finally not to the point. He had had a conception of film which was more or less his own, and he did not feel the desire to argue about it, or install himself modestly in a scholar's catalogue of predecessors and contemporaries, it seemed to him naturally and without great heat that *Maidstone* was a film made more by the method by which it had been made than any film he knew, and if there were others of which it could be said that they were even more, he would cheer them for the pleasure of seeing what was done. But his film was his own, and he knew it, and he supposed he could write about it well enough to point out from time to time what was special and mysterious in the work, and therefore full of relation to that argument about cinema which has brought us this far, cinema—that river enema of the sins. Wasn't there whole appropriation of meaning in every corner of the mogul business?

1. In the practice

He had, of course, embarked on the making of *Maidstone* with his own money, had in fact sold a piece of his shares of *The Village Voice*, a prosperous and sentimental holding. Not wishing to undergo the neurotic bends of trying to raise funds for a film he would begin shooting in a few weeks without a line of script or the desire to put anything on paper—he looked with horror on such a move!—he had small choice. Who would give him funds on past performance? In his first picture the sound was near to muffled; the second, while ready to be shown in the fall at the New York Film Festival, was nonetheless not yet evidence at a box office, and in fact had been sold to a distributor for fifteen thousand dollars, a small sale even for a movie which had cost no more than sixty.

It was of course possible he could have raised the money. The market was full of profit that year. Risk capital ready for tax loss could have been found. He did not try. There was some marrow of satisfaction in paying for it himself. So he sold a portion of *The Voice* and did not look back. The film was calling to him with every stimulus and every fear. He had, after all, conceived the heart of his movie in the days right after the assassination of Robert Kennedy, a time when it seemed the country was getting ready to blow its separate conventions apart (and indeed he was the man least surprised when the Democratic convention in Chicago had responsible politicians talking of the

Reichstag fire). Besides, he was a guilty American, guilty with the others—he felt implicated in the death of Bobby, although he could never name how (short of fornicating with a witch on the afternoon of the deed) he must therefore be so responsible; nonetheless he was, he felt, along with ten million others—perhaps a backlash from years of living with Kennedy jibes and making some of them himself, perhaps from some unconscious delinquency which amounted to more.

In any case, a film he had contemplated for a year, a modest little film to take place in a bar with pimps waiting for their whores and then dealing with them, now turned inside out. He would use that original idea for the core of a larger story, as the sketch of a film to be made by a famous film director within a larger film. This film director would be one of fifty men whom America in her bewilderment and profound demoralization might be contemplating as a possible President, a film director famous for near pornographic films would be, yes, in range of the Presidency—what a time for the country! Now the last of his elements of plot came into place: there would be an elite group of secret police debating the director's assassination. What an impulse to put this into a script! But writing such a script and managing to direct it would take three years, and call for working with executives in a studio. Others would devour his story and make it something else. He preferred to make it himself, preferred to lose the story himself.

He knew from his experience with *Beyond the Law* (a film of the greatest simplicity next to this!) that when actors were without lines and the end of a scene was undetermined, one did not control the picture. Even if he would be in the middle of the film, would play in it as he had in the two others, would in fact play the leading role of the director (indeed find another actor on earth to even believe in such a role!), that did not mean the film would proceed as he had planned. At best, making movies by his method was like being the hostess at a party with a prearranged theme—at a party, let us say, where everybody was supposed to come dressed in black or white with the understanding that those in black should pretend to be somber in mood and those in white be gay. The guests would of course rebel, first by tricks, then by open stands. A beauty would arrive in red. The party would get away from the hostess constantly—as constantly would she work to restore it to the conception with which she began, yes, she would strive until the point where the party was a success and she could put up with her rules being broken. There would be art in the relinquishing of her strength. If the party turned out to be superb it would be the product not only of her theme, nor of the attack of her guests upon it, but her compensatory efforts to bring the party back to its theme. The history of what happened at her party was bound to prove more interesting than her original plan. Indeed, something parallel to that had occurred with *Beyond the Law*. He had started with an idea of putting together police, a police station, and the interrogation of suspects. But his actors had been as rich in ideas. In trying to keep them within his conception, the picture had taken on a ferocious life.

Yet with *Maidstone* he decided to gamble by a bolder step. Given his plot, he would be obliged to separate his functions as director and actor. It would help his performance if the actor passed through situations he could not dominate because he had also as director had the privilege of laying his eyes on every scene. It was important, for example, that the secret police who would look to assassinate him be able to have their plots filmed without his knowledge. On that account he had assigned directorial powers to several of the actors. They could pick photographers to do their scenes, scenes he would not see until filming was done. So too had he assigned autonomy to Rip Torn who would play Raoul Rey O'Houlihan, his fictional half-brother, an obvious potential assassin in the film—whether Rey would actually strike was tacitly understood to be open to the pressures within the making of the movie. Since Rey would also have the Cashbox, a Praetorian Guard loyal either to Rey or to Kingsley, that must prove still another undetermined element in the film. Of

necessity, therefore, would Rey have photographers he could call on. So the company as a whole had five cameras for use—four Arriflex and one Eclair—five teams composed of a cameraman and sound man who were sometimes interchangeable, each team independent, each able to work under available light conditions which might vary from splendid to absurdly difficult, five teams to be spread out on certain days as much as five miles apart, for he had managed to capture the use of four fine houses for the week of shooting the film, an exercise in diplomacy he had not been capable of on any other weekend in his life, he had the estates, and kept them by a further exercise of diplomacy through the weeks before the picture and into the shooting. There were crises every day and he was on the edge of losing more than one set of grounds on more than one day, but the torrent of preparations was on, his energy was carried with the rush—in a few weeks they began with a cast of fifty or sixty (new actors coming and leaving all the time), a capital of seventy thousand dollars, an availability of forty or fifty hours of sound and film, an average of eight to ten hours for each cameraman in a week of shooting which would begin on a light day of work for Wednesday, would pass through the heaviest of schedules on Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and finish with light work on Monday and Tuesday, an impossible speed for anyone fixed to the script of a movie as ambitious as this, but he had cards to play. They were his cameramen.

2.

They had almost all taken part in the making of *Monterey Pop*, which had some of the best cinematography he had ever seen. They had many other credits. That was hardly the point. It was more to the issue that the stodgy unhappy catatonia of the old documentary, where people bearing real names sat in chairs and explained in self-conscious voices what they were up to, had been liberated by the invention of a wireless synchronizer between camera and tape recorder. A cameraman free of the caution that he must always move in ways the sound man could follow (since they had once been connected by a leash to one another) was now able to get around as he wished; he could stand on a ladder or slide on his belly, he could walk while filming and turn (years of technique had gone into acquiring a flat-footed walk which might approximate the old camera move on a dolly) but since he was not on tracks or connected to anyone else, so the path could be free in its curve. The eye of the lens could inquire into the scene. The cameraman could even shoot up from the floor between the bodies of men in a dispute or listen to a social conversation from a worm's-eye view beneath a glass coffee table—what play of light on the ashtrays and the highballs! Such shots went back of course to *Citizen Kane*—the issue was that documentary could now be open to subjects which were formerly closed. Since a camera on a man's shoulder was not as intimidating as the old huge camera on a tripod, the subject felt less like a prisoner booked into the stocks of documentary record-taking. Indeed a man who actually reacted to his voice and movements was photographing him. Animation could begin to appear in the face and voice of the subject. So the subject became more interesting. The documentary moved from the photographing of executives, engineers, and inventors to the faces of slum children playing in the street, or to the study of married couples on an evening at home (and in bed). A world of subjects too fragile in mood for the entrance of heavy equipment, high-power lights, and crews of technicians became available, and people who had formerly been as interesting in front of the camera as slabs of stone began to show a gleam in their facade. But *cinéma vérité* still had technical limits which awaited the development of high-speed film with very little grain and better portable sound equipment.

Cinéma vérité suffered even further from the basic flaw that people were playing themselves in real situations, and were therefore the opposite of actors. Instead of offering a well-put-together lie which had all the feel of dramatic truth, they gave off a species of fact which came out flat and wooden and like a lie. It was as if there was a law that a person could not be himself in front of a camera unless he pretended to be someone other than himself. By that logic, *cinéma vérité* would work if it photographed a performer in the midst of his performance, since a musician in the reverberating cave of his work was hardly himself, he had moved out of daily dimensions, he was a creature in a kingdom of sound. So films like *Monterey Pop* were able to explore the existence of a performer on stage as no fixed camera had been able to do. The crew was small enough to be lost in the lights and the audience. Their lens could move in, retreat, turn away and react, even swing to the beat. Film came back of Janis Joplin and Otis Redding, of Jimi Hendrix and Ravi Shankar, which went beyond any film seen before of musicians giving a performance. It was precisely because the cameramen had worked free of the stipulations of a director. They knew more of what a camera could do than any director who had not spent years as a cameraman himself, they had lived in their conscious mind and in all the aesthetic ponderings of the unconscious with the problems of composition in a fast-changing scene, their eye for the potentialities of camera expression was their own. So far as a man could take a thirty- or forty-pound camera on his shoulder and still see with the freedom of an unimpeded eye they were ready, they could interpret: critical to the matter—they could react. It meant musicians could play without a thought of being photographed, and so were never inhibited by the restrictions directors and cameramen working on massive tripods were obliged to impose on a performer's movement.

It had been his own idea, however, that *cinéma vérité* might also be used to photograph feature-length movies which told imaginary stories. He had come to the thought by way of his first film. Even if that had ended as a disaster (because the just-tolerable sound he heard on magnetic tape was not tolerable with an optical track), there had been a period in editing when he saw something he had never seen in other films. The actors (he was one of them) were more real, seemed more—it had to be said—more vivid than in other films. He supposed it was because people in fictional situations had never been photographed with such sensitivity before. The camera moved with the delicacy and uncertainty, the wariness before possible shock, that the human eye would feel in a strange situation. The camera had the animal awareness of a fifteen-year-old entering a room rather than a Mafia overlord promenading down a corridor. It made him realize that the movement of camera in conventional film (in filmed theatre) had none of the real movement of the eye, just the horizontal movement of vehicles, the vertical movement of elevators, and the turning movement of a door on a hinge. The eye of such cameras moved in relation to the human eye as a steam shovel moves in relation to the human body. The professional camera, however, was smooth, as indubitably smooth as the closing of a coffin lid. If it passed through space with the rigidity of a steam shovel, it did not clank. That, unhappily, was left for the *cinéma vérité* camera. The price of greater sensitivity to the unpremeditated action of actors was a set of vibrations, shudders, clunks, plus a host of missed anticipations when the camera zoomed in on the expectation of an interesting response, and the actor, whom the photographer had picked, was dull. Yet even that was cinematically curious once one recovered from the shock that not every instant on screen was shaped into significance. For now the cinematic point became the fact that the photographer could never know precisely what was coming—he was *obliged* to anticipate and he could be wrong: a story began to be told of the uncertain investigation of the eye onto each scene before us. It expanded one's notion of cinematic possibilities, and it intensified one's awareness of the moment. When significant movement was captured, it was now doubly significant because one could not take it for granted.

Watching film became an act of interpretation and restoration for what was missed—much as one might look to fill the empty unpainted spaces in old canvases of Larry Rivers—it was also kin to that sense of excitement which is felt at a party when insights are arriving more quickly than one's ability to put them away neatly.

By whatever point of view, he had then a corps of cameramen, and they were equipped to photograph scenes which might veer off in any one of a dozen directions—they were ready to be surprised. It stimulated that coordination between hand, eye, and camera balance which was the dynamic of their art, surprises gave style to the rhythm and angle by which they would move in or zoom away. Once, after an impromptu free-for-all had developed in the filming of *Beyond the Law* with actors' bodies finally locked on the floor like a heap of twist-roll dough shaped for the oven, the cameraman had said, "You know I'd like to cover the camera with a case of foam rubber." And added wistfully, "Then I could just get in the middle of the fight next time." Such ideas carried to their conclusion might slip nonstop miniaturized cameras with built-in lights up the cervix to a baby's fist so the trip through the canal could be photographed, but that was years away from its unhappy debate—for the present he had cameramen who were nimble enough to work in close to a scene and get away (most of the time) without bumping the action or photographing the sound man. Or each other, if two cameras were working different angles.

Later, comparing two men's work on the same scene, he would come to observe that each man had a mode as characteristic as a literary style. The work of one was invariably well-composed, austere, tasteful; another would be alert to the play of forces between two actors—he would have talent for capturing that body language which would most accentuate what the actors unconsciously were doing. Another had little interest in the turn of a scene, but was fascinated with visual minutiae—occasionally his minutiae were more interesting than the scene. Some were best at photographing men, others at studying women or the mood of a landscape. Some were workhorses, some were delicate. Some were delicate and still worked like horses.

He came to applaud his cameramen during the week of shooting the film, for there were days when they worked for sixteen hours, bodies quivering from fatigue, yet rallying to steadiness when they worked—the love affair was to go through a turn or two when he sat in a screening room for two weeks and studied the forty-five hours they had brought back, saw the unexpected mistakes, the loss of focus on sudden shifts of action, the edge of the microphone in the frame when the unforeseen move of an actor had flushed the sound man. And wistful disappointments when scenes on which he had counted mightily had lost their emphasis because the cameraman had not seen what he, the director, had seen, had not been in the same state of psychic awareness. And there were miles of footage, filmed in his absence, where the actors had gone wandering and the cameramen had let them, idiocies piled on idiocies, wooden muddy characterless footage, the depression of the cameraman visible in his lack of desire to give visual shape to a tiresome duet. Loss was everywhere in the forty-five hours.

But there were bonuses and benefits where he had never looked. Scenes he had thought uninspired as he played them were given life by the art of the photographer, and scenes he knew were good were made even better by choices of angle he would not have had the foresight to pick himself. If he lost what he desired in one scene, he found himself compensated in another. As the months of editing went on, he would feel at times like a sculptor discovering his statue. The chisel could not go where it wished, but there was a statue to be disclosed if one would follow the veins of the stone. So *Maidstone* began to emerge, not the idea for a picture with which he had begun, but another which had come out of it, a metamorphosis for which he was prepared, since in



Figure 7.4 Mailer's wife Beverly Bentley as Chula Mae in Arthurian head dress in *Maidstone* (1970). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

parallel to the flaws and bonuses of his *cinéma vérité* photography the *Maidstone* emerging was as much better than the conception with which he had started, as it was inferior.

If it was a movie of another sort than he had first conceived, it seemed to him finally that there were not too many movies like it, for *Maidstone* was a film which had been made out of the materials of its making, a movie which had had almost no existence in plans or on drawing boards or detailed budgets before it was begun, a movie delivered out of film material which had come to life in the heat chamber of five days of intense improvised and scriptless film-making, so a movie which had a curious first existence in itself not easy to describe and then a later existence which did not come from the stone but the shape of the film maker's hand. If he had arrived at six or seven hours of footage he considered suitable or agreeable or useful or tasty or splendid or fine or essential, if the smelting had reduced forty-five hours of film to a seventh of itself, there was still, he knew, a length to which the material must shrink by way of brooding, rubbing, and polishing, by elucidation then de-infatuation with pieces of film or conceits of story he had loved too much at first to relinquish. It would be a work of months, and then finally of a year (and a second year to follow) of mistakes and losses, blunders and mislaid gems of film strip, but when done, it would be his conception, he would by then have written a movie using strips of film rather than words, a movie different from the film anyone else would have made out of the same six or seven hours of usable film, would have written it as uniquely and differently as any one writer would have been from another writer if both were working on the same topic and had the same dictionary. It was his film.

He had framed some of the language, and others had framed the rest of it for him, but by the time he began his editing, it was all part of the same dictionary; he had created *Maidstone* out of the given; so it was entirely different from films which had devoted their effort to creating the given from a script, then nailing it up according to plan.

In the act of this most particular film-writing, his pencil become the size of an editing machine, he discovered where he thought the nature of the film might lie, and so tried to end with a film which would be in itself the nature of film, a metaphysical dumpling of a remark which is close to indigestible. Does it make it easier to suggest that even as an angel may be the nature of goodness and beauty, so to look at an angel is to obtain a picture of humans from heaven? By analogy he wanted a film which would live in the mind like a movie star, that is he wanted the film itself to be the movie star, some evocative, ambiguous presence which was always suggesting the ghostly but most real intrusion of the special existence of cinema.

3.

But he anticipates. He has come to the peroration before he has reached the middle. It is a natural mistake for a film-maker. A novelist learns early in his career that beginning, middle, and end are a part of literary time, and cause direct notice when shifted, but in film no time exists but the order of progression. A film is made by one piece of film being stuck onto the next and that is the only scheme of time which prevails. Afloat on the full tide of a film we see an actor who looks twenty years old. In the next cut he looks sixty—we do not jump immediately to the conclusion that it is forty years later, no, we may have to recognize it is his idea of himself forty years later, or his recollection of a previous life when he was sixty. Indeed it may be a shot of his grandfather—we wait for the next cut. If it explains nothing, merely goes off to further adventures of the twenty-year-old, the isolated cut has its peculiar existence—it is a warning or a symbol or an omen, something—it sticks with its incomprehensible flash even as we have flashes in life of people we know well who are seen for an instant doing something we cannot comprehend—the town patriot sticks his tongue out at the flag: next moment he is, as always, smiling on his cigar. Did we see the tongue go out or did one crazy cell in our own head imagine it? That is a fair preparation for film. One can put anything next to anything in film—there is a correlative in some psychic state of memory, in the dream, the *deja vu*, or the death mask, in some blink of the eye or jump of the nerve. So one can work whole stretches of film free of any thought of the story. A piece of film can be put next to another piece of film regardless of plot—it will work or it will not work. Of course, this is exactly the place where the mystique of film begins and one starts to talk of its nature. Every beginner of a film cutter becomes willy-nilly an amateur philosopher about the time he recognizes that you cannot attach one piece of film to another simply because it makes sense for your story. If the cut is poor, the screen will jump. A virtuoso can make it jump to one side, then to the other—that, too, is a psychic state the film can offer, but it is like the dying spasms of a broken tooth—can the average film afford such pain?

No, there was a syntax to film movement. The slow sweep of a man walking to the left and out of the frame could be followed by the sweep of another man walking to the right. If the tempos were similar, the movement was restful. If the second man walked faster than the first the logical expectation was for a faster and more intense scene on the third cut. Some action would obviously be getting ready. What it was would hardly matter. A fight could follow between two men or two dogs, an airplane could dive, a train go by, or a woman could scream, then turn immobile and the

freezing of her movement would go into the strictures of the scream. You could do anything in film if you could do it. Of course, some cuts were vastly better than others but led you to more exquisite troubles since several beautiful cuts in a row awakened expectations which oncoming material would have to satisfy. If there was nothing that good to follow, it was like stopping in the middle of the act.

On the other hand, mediocre cuts could follow one another, each cut more or less endurable, until suddenly a cut would go dead. The cut had seemed reasonable for the plot but it left a feeling in the lungs analogous to breathing the exhaust of a bus. Cuts were like words. You could put many an ordinary word next to another word but you could not put them all. If your last name was Klotz, you might call your son Chris, but you would not call your girl Emerald, not unless your ear and the ear of fashion were in a special little race that year. Godard made jump cuts in *Breathless* which no one had been able to endure before, did it out of all his experience as a cutter, and from his artistic insight that the verboten had moved to the edge of the virtuoso. Yet, you may be certain the twenty precise cuts before the jump cut fed subtly into it, if indeed the jump cut had not become the particular metaphysic of that film.

Still, some cuts work, some do not. Some cuts work in extraordinary fashion. One cannot understand why two pieces of film otherwise unrelated seem agreeable next to one another, even appear on screen with that same unfolding of mood the sun suggests as it works at last through a cloud. Poetry is working. A few words which had little to do with one another are now enriching each other. Peerless grapefruit peel! In color film the effect is twice to be noticed. For the syntax of good movement can be reduced by the color, or, since color film is easily as malleable to editing as black and white, an otherwise indifferent movement will be given resonance by the shift of color. It does not matter what is used. A good cutter with enough film can cut a run of images which will give pleasure to an audience. If there is no story present, no other exposition or logic than the aesthetic of color, composition, and movement, then there is a length to such a film, and it is not usually more than a quarter of an hour. Give a hint of story, however, and the interest of the audience might ride for twice as long. The good cutter is like a very good skier. He does not study the trail ahead, he sets out down the mountain, makes his turns as they come, does his checks, his drops into the fall line, his traverses into the hill, then tips around and down again. It is beauty to watch. If we add the knowledge that he is in a race, the beauty is hardly diminished and our tension is certainly increased. It is not unlike what happens when a hint of story is added to film montage.

Now, however, create a complexity for which film is uniquely suited. Offer a situation where the film seems to tell the audience the skier is in a race, then a minute later seems to indicate he is not in a race. All the while we are following his descent—now the race seems to be on again. To the attention and irritation of not knowing which situation is real, and to the beauty of the photography, have been added ambiguities of context. A fine slippery shiver of meaning comes over us because the situation has altered a little faster than our comprehension of it. Film can offer such sensations as no other art.

If, then, he was ready to start with a conventional, even supercharged movie plot (which he knew would be quickly warped, intensified, dissipated, and altered) and if he was equally ready to throw a Colosseum fodder of actors almost totally untrained into such maximum circus, it was because he had learned that improvised scenes with *cinéma vérité* photographers gave many more opportunities to the cutter than the choices open to a film editor who was working on a movie whose rushes came off a script. For, whether trained or untrained, actors in any improvised scene had hardly any more idea of what the final relation of their scene would be to the eventual movie than a man in a love affair may know if his woman will be with him for the rest of his life.

So there was an indispensably intense air of the provisional and the real to the actors' work. They were not present to send off signals, as actors with a script must unconsciously do, that the end of the scene was near. Therefore, any improvised scenes which worked in whole or in part, which is to say had vitality or flashes of vitality, always gave some interesting ensemble of movement that could be used as the springboard for a quick or curious cut to the tempo of other actors in other improvised scenes which were also working well. Indeed, one could cut away from a continuing scene at any point—for the script was still to be put together. That was a choice which film with a script would rarely offer. With script, each scene was staged and thereby necessarily acted with its little unconscious beginning, little middle, and little end. Options for interesting cuts were on the consequence blocked. A scene which ended with a book being laid with measured finality on a table tended all too often to require an ensuing movement equally full of the slow and the stately. That was legitimate if the flow of the movie called up such a tone, but it was deadening if the next scene in the script wished to get off to a quick start. That next cut could no more ignore the last pause than a conversation could glide over the remark that a friend had passed away.

Improvisation obviously gave more freedom to the cutter, so much in fact that the logic by which one began to connect pieces of film to each other seemed at times to arise out of the very logic of film—even if the logic of film was a concept as deeply buried as the logic of language and so might have to wait for its first tentative elucidation by a semantics of film. What appeared as the immediate difference was that with improvisation and free cutting the story was not obliged to be present as the walls and foundation of a movie, but rather became a house afloat on some curious stream, a melody perhaps on which many an improvisation was winging—it was as if story now had the same rare relation to film which images bear to language. The influence of story now was partial, not whole. For even as language consists of both the concrete and the abstract, of particular images and also of concepts which have no image, so any logic of film could contain elements of natural story and elements of movement which were opposed to story or simply indifferent to story. The resonance of film, the experience of film—words were of diminishing use here—seemed to derive from some necessary tension between the two, even as language seems to require that we pass from image to concept and back.

But if *Maidstone* (as a prime example of the logic of film) is already once removed from words, it is twice dangerous to keep speaking of it without offering a little more of the particular experience which produced it. If the obvious suggestion arises that the experience resides in the nature of improvisation, one may be forgiven the excessive symmetry of next suggesting that the concealed properties of film and improvisation are parallel (which is why they may belong together). We look at film, any film, and chaos is to a degree ordered. (We can, for example, photograph a wastebasket and it has become more an object of order than it was before.) We know we are looking at a life which is not quite life although it will certainly shift the way we live. So improvisation also orders chaos—gives its focus to random emotions—also becomes a life which is not quite life, and yet, even more than film, improvisation suggests it is indeed ready to become life. Ready to become life? Are we speaking of the moment when a fantasy, which is to say a psychological reality in the mind, transcends itself and becomes a fact? We are probably back to the last afternoon in the filming of *Maidstone*.

4.

Given his theories on improvisation, there was a problem to filming *Maidstone*, and it was fundamental. While he took it for granted that any man or woman who could talk under stress was

usually ready to burst forth with an improvised characterization (almost as if the ability to act, like the ability to make love, had been waiting for its opportunity), still one could never forget that art is art and self-expression is all too often therapy. The need therefore was to have a scheme which would keep the improvisation from flowing over into a purge. Some constraint had to be found for each scene; ideally, an overlying constraint had to be found for the entire film.

In *Beyond the Law*, the problem seemed to solve itself. Being a policeman or a suspect arrested for the night was apparently one of the formal, even primeval scenes of the unconscious. None of his actors had trouble believing they were either policemen or under arrest, indeed his actors were richer in the conception of their role than the author would have been if he had written it for them. Nor had his presence as a director even been necessary in every scene. He had filmed most of *Beyond the Law* on an unrented floor in a seedy office building. It was perfect for giving the sensation that one was upstairs at a police station. Since he had set up interrogations between his detectives and suspects in separate rooms, three camera teams worked apart from one another in the different interrogation chambers. As in a police station, detectives came in and out, questioned a man, took off. Other detectives came in. After a period of filming, the floor of the office building might as well have become a police station.

There was a babble of sound throughout, prisoners were arguing, weeping, protesting, going silent, detectives were bellowing or intoning charges, sounds of a beating in one room were agitating an unstable prisoner in another. Half the movie had been filmed in two nights, filmed on a sea of sound and cinematic sensations.

Now, however, he was ready to make a film of no simple premise and much complexity. Ideally, many of his scenes would be subtle. Any demonstration of the value of making a movie by this method would depend consequently on how elusive, light, and sinister, were the effects obtained. The proof that his method had resources could only be demonstrated by capturing delicate qualities which none but the most carefully prepared films had hitherto provided. Since he also wished his picture to be nothing less than comic, farcical, sexy, on the edge of horror, and with more than a hint of the ghostly, the concoction would not be automatic to obtain.

Still, he believed he could get it if he could only provide an atmosphere, some pervasive atmosphere, in which his untried actors would arrive at a working mood. For *Beyond the Law*, his police station had provided that atmosphere, provided it as forcefully as a movie being made in a coal mine. But *Maidstone* would be filmed half in open air; the other half would take place in living rooms and sitting rooms which were models of the exotic or the established. Any prevailing atmosphere could not be simply created by an ideal set—rather it would have to come from the presence of the film-making itself descended as some sort of spirit-resident upon East Hampton, a somewhat frightening film, to be certain, for its central figure was a man living in danger of assassination. Since improvisation was never dependable, far from it! the theme was uneasy to all. Murder is another of the primeval scenes of the unconscious. The impulse, however, is guarded by bulldogs in fifty restraining collars—murder was not likely to occur this week on the cheap. Nonetheless, it was only a month and a little more since Bobby Kennedy was dead. That was a thought which lay heavy. Another was the instability of fifty or sixty actors, some white, some black, all congregating, and soon fornicating in two small hotels. Nor were the scenes to be played likely to reduce any tension.

He was not so paranoid as to see the venture daring more than a most risk-diminished form of Russian roulette. Surely, not more than one chance in a hundred, say at the most unlucky, one chance in ten of a real assassination attempt, but whatever the percentage, the practical working movie point was that one percent of real risk introduced a paranoid atmosphere of risk which might

be put at twenty percent. And that was a percentage to work with, a percentage to keep the cast in a state of diabolical inclinations, some sensuousness, and much dread. How could legitimate fear not arise that some innocent bystander, some bit actor, would catch a maladroitness effort at assassination intended for another? So a presence for the film had been created. The fear of assassination hung over the cinematic shooting like the faintest luminous evanescent arch of the ineluctable beyond, yes, some pale shade was there, some representative of the ghost-world of film there along with everything else, along with chaos, cries of love in the grass, and the physical grind of the work, the rush of scenes, the military madness of schedule.

Actor and quartermaster, general, production engineer, and the only substitute for a script girl, he had himself more roles than ever before in his life, and staggered through *Maidstone* with the brain of an exhausted infantryman, his mind obliged to work as it had never before, work constantly and without respect for its age, vices, and sedentary habits. Since he also had not slept more than four hours a night for the last two weeks of preparation, keyed to a pitch which if struck could have given off a note, he was speaking slowly for the first time in his life, his brain too used-up to talk fast—the picture was later to prosper as a result since people for once could hear him!—he had nonetheless to wonder at the oddest moments (for there was an unmistakable rainbow of fear and elation in the breath of his chest and it did not leave until the film was done), had to wonder why he was taking such a peculiar chance, which if small was still unnecessary, and knew it had some murky soil of congested roots in the irrational equation that Bobby Kennedy had taken a large chance for a large goal, and he must—in some equilibration of all the underground pressure systems of guilt—now find a way to take a smaller chance for his own private goal, suspected he would never have made this movie or even conceived of it if he had not sat in a room with Bobby Kennedy a month before his death and failed to realize danger: that the man was in mortal danger. So he had a motive not far from obsession: one could return to it over many a year.

Of course his other motive was professional, even elegant in its professionalism. For the fact that he not only made a movie about a possible assassination but gave it structure as a game, even offered the fierce privilege of autonomy to actors who were scheming up plots for his possible cinematic assassination, must also mean that the presence was now being fortified. So he played his part, acting for at least half of his working day rather than directing, his own role certainly helped by that delicate baleful edge of presence which might lead to artwork, a debacle, or outright disaster. He had no idea what was being hatched about him. He knew only that a variety of large and little plots gave every indication of generating some focus, some steam, some point of a gun, and went through days with staggering schedules, his best reason for speed the instability of the situation. His actors were in for a long weekend. Any longer and the presence would explode or worse, appear absurd, dissipate. Each day in fact he was losing actors, some from frustration, some from fear, some of them good, some promising. Potentialities of story which hung on their presence would have to take a turn. He was not worried at that, not worried by any item of plot or arrival or departure. They would, as he told the company, take B if they could not take A.

So he lived on the fine fever of making the film, hardly aware of any hullabaloo but his own; he was become a powerless instrument of his own will, pleased at bottom to be out of touch with two whole sides of his film—the assassination activities of the secret police, and the possibly murderous ones of the Praetorian Guard—stayed like some animal in a zone of hunters knowing the great fatigue of a high alert, his senses an adrenalin of warnings whenever Raoul Rey O'Houlihan-Rip Torn was near, for he knew as if Torn were his true brother that the web of intrigues had Torn at the center, that if psychic biddings and curses were flying like bats through the ranks of the company, then Torn was the hole in the roof where they all came in. What pressure! What logic and

what torture! What impulse! For Torn was more than an actor, he had in addition to debate his attempt to be the assassin. The vanity of a proud actor, not nearly recognized sufficiently for his talent, for the remarkable force of unholy smolderings he could always present, now had to become a vanity pushing him to take the center, to move from that secondary position of acolyte to the leading part, and preempt the part, be the killer who invaded the hill. Yet he was also first centurion of the guard to protect Kingsley from the point of the threat, and took his mission seriously, yes, with all the seriousness of a profound actor steeped in his improvisation. Ready to die in order to save Kingsley, he was also ready to kill him—anything but to have the quiet insistent pressure of the picture pass into nowhere, all threats stilled, his own role stilled.

So the night before the afternoon on the grass, the night of the assassination ball became O'Houlihan's high agony. Raoul Rey-Rip Torn had become the center of the film, the focus of every loyalty to the director, yet the wild card in every plot, since it had become an unspoken convention that the attempt of assassination would be on the night of the ball (as if actors in a sustained improvisation ganged naturally to the idea of a focus of plot), so in the hours of the night as the party went by, plots arose and were shattered or missed, or evaded, the director never feeling more real in the role. Uncertain of the size of the attempt, or whether the attempt was even yet to come, not knowing if he played in a game which was a real drama, or worked for a drama just so absurd as a game, he did not accept the more obvious gambits of plot which were offered him. If obvious, they seemed ridiculous, as though one gave assent to pressing a button which would release a boxing glove in one's face. No, he took up posts, or promenaded for two



Figure 7.5 Norman Mailer with friend and poet Edward Bonetti take part in a round of boxing in *Maidstone* (1970). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

hours—impromptu bodyguard always about him—hung in the situation for two hours, and the time done and the party over, spoke now not to Rey but to Rip as if the movie were finished, as indeed he thought it was, for nothing but a few elements of the dream called “The Death of the Director” would be filmed on Gardiners Island with the company next day, a day in fact for picnic and celebration that the film was over.

His own danger had been as one part in one hundred or less, but he was glad it was done, and so said to his fictional brother, “I don’t know if we got anything tonight, but it’s still all right,” thinking to himself of the dozen different ways he could cut the film (his security residing in a documentary on the making of an unsuccessful film since there was always footage of his own voluminous directions to the cast) and so saying, went to bed and finally to sleep, and the next day found to his horror that on Gardiners Island after the lecture of orientation was over that the presence of the dread was returned, but now shorn of elation, shorn of a rainbow.

There was something heavy, then awful in the air, he knew he was in more physical danger than at any time before, and as Torn came walking toward him across the green, hammer dangling from his hand, he remembered taking off his black leather vest and holding it like a short folded cape in lieu of a better weapon, and after the fight, too furious to speak to Torn for many a month, outraged that Torn had broken the unspoken convention of their film—that violence cease with the end of the filming of the ball—was yet obliged to discover in the months of studying his forty-five hours of reels that his own blunder had been enormous in giving so much autonomy to Torn and the other assistant directors. The work they had done was by sections good, but not finally good enough. The buried half of the film he had been waiting to see would remain for the most part buried. He had been left with the most embarrassing work of all, an ego trip, for he had been the hardest-working actor in the film, and so the film was his, it was all too unhappily his, and all too much of him, since that was the part which unfortunately worked the best. Torn had therefore been right to make his attack. The hole in the film had called for that. Without it, there was not enough. And with it—he glimpsed as he worked each day with his editors that a film was emerging which he would yet be pleased to call his own for it was a mysterious film and became more mysterious as he thought on it. It was reminiscent first of the image he had held of the ski race which was on, then declared off, then put on again—the film shifted from context to context in modes as obsessive and haunting and attached to memory as those recollections of indefinable moments between sleep and a dream where context shifts, only to shift back again—we are in the dream . . . no, it is the edge of day. So Proust had floated his reader on a hundred-page procession of state from sleep to wakefulness into sleep.

In *Maidstone* the context moved into some other place. It was a film about the surface of reality and the less visible surface of psychological reality. For if everyday reality was a surface, or a crust, or a skin, psychological reality was a balloon which lived as a surface so long as the air of belief was within it. And since he had come to write his *Maidstone* after all the film was in, he chose the mysterious shifting character of its surface as the subject, and looked to show just how many of its realities were psychological realities which could suddenly be exploded and then where had they gone?

What was left of such reality? It was a project he could never have commenced with words, nor even with the fiction of a story, but *Maidstone* had been filmed not only as an imaginary event but as a real event, and so was both a fiction and a documentary at once and then become impossible to locate so precisely, for what came nearest to the hard hide of the real? Was it Norman Mailer, the self-satisfied director, instructing his cast for the last time, or was it the suddenly real head of Norman T. Kingsley that Torn as suddenly attacked. (Yet his hammer had been held carefully on the

flat to reduce the damage.) For if the attack was real, the actor upon whom it was wreaked should not be, and would not be unless the attack became fiercer still, fierce enough to kill him indeed. Then Kingsley would have become undeniably more real than Mailer.

It was a species of realization—that the hide of the real remains real only so long as the psychologically real fails to cut into its existence by an act which makes psychology real—the tongue would twist in its turnings on such a philosophical attempt faster than the film. For it was possible *Maidstone* inhabited that place where the film was supposed to live—that halfway station between the psychological and the real which helped to explain the real. As time went on, he saw that the cutting he did by newly acquired instinct was with purpose, and had a logic to reveal the topography of that halfway station. For *Maidstone* kept promising developments of plot which never quite took place, even as we travel through our lives forever anticipating the formation of plots around us which do not quite form. We are always looking for real stories to ensue which never exactly enact themselves as we expect, yet we still work at such times as actors in the real story of our life, pursuing roles which can become our life at any instant the psychological can become the real—as occasionally it will. For out of fifty stories in which we are at any instant



Figure 7.6 Norman Mailer with journalist/film-maker James Toback in scene cut from *Maidstone* (1970). Frame enlargement from 16mm triacetate projection print. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

enmeshed (fifty sets of expectations that next week we fall in love or tonight we go out and get drunk and have a terrible fight), not three times out of fifty, not two, nor one does the expected event occur. And then it does, it happens, it takes place out of the stored force of all the denouements which did not take place.

So Torn attacked out of all the plots of other actors, Torn became the presence of the film, the psychological reality that became a literal reality out of the pressure of all the ones which did not. So that film about a director who would run for President became instead a photographed event of simulated plots and threats kept under high pressure by the curious curse of playing with photography of the female in the act of love, of playing with the curse of love which is gone, of playing with the curses of matrimony, yes, that film of an event which was a thousand events (of which nine hundred and ninety had small issue, or none, or were never photographed) became at last a film of the ineffable shimmer of reality, even became, as its director had wished, the star itself. Then it was that the presence of the film crystallized into the Geist of *Maidstone*, Rip Torn. A superb actor at a pitch of intensity was there finally to reveal the premise on which a film had been built, even offer the essence of a method which might yet become the future of the film. For is it not a common premise to many a lover of movies that the hidden wealth in every strongbox of the cinematographic are those sequences of footage where the event has been innocent of script and yet resonant with life? Of course! We are talking of nothing other than movie stars in frames where the mood has been pure. Mood is our only acquaintance with the sensuous properties of time. And film is the only art which can search, cut by cut, into the mystery of moods which follow and accommodate one another; film is the only art which can study sudden shifts of mood which sever the ongoing river of time a fine film has set in flow. So we search for the pure in film as we search for the first real tear of love. We are a Faustian age determined to meet the Lord or the Devil before we are done, and the ineluctable ore of the authentic is our only key to the lock.

With the advent of electronic editing from video tapes the notion of writing one's movie out of the film at one's disposal—since it promises to be quicker and easier—becomes next to inevitable.

8

THE LIFE AND DEATH OF THE CELEBRITY AUTHOR IN *MAIDSTONE*

Sarah Bishop

This essay was originally published in the Fall 2012 Issue of The Mailer Review. It is re-printed here with the permission of its author.

Just as the text of Norman Mailer's *Advertisements For Myself* is an attempt to let the reader in on a range of aspects of Norman Mailer's writing life, the paratext of the original 1959 edition is remarkable for its efforts to show the consumer detailed facets of Mailer's image. The cover shows him smiling seductively into the camera, in a white t-shirt and yacht cap, playfully upper-class clothing that resonates with images of Mailer's own existential hero, presidential hopeful Senator John F. Kennedy, who was frequently photographed at the Hyannis Port Yacht Club. The back cover of the book shows the author in four different poses: in the first, Mailer is the young and brooding author of *The Naked and the Dead*; in the second, he is the more mature intellectual behind *Barbary Shore*; the third captures him in a checkered shirt, looking casual and cool, the real-life model for Sergius O'Shaugnessy in *The Deer Park*; and the fourth portrays him as a bearded beatnik, a middle-aged white hipster with his head resting pensively on his hand. Showing Mailer from every angle, *Advertisements for Myself* offers up "the real" Mailer for the reader's entertainment.

A meditation on both self-expression and self-promotion, *Advertisements for Myself* anthologizes Mailer's existential quest for authenticity at the same time as it reveals his performative approach to celebrity authorship. Depicting himself as the authentic author, unfettered by the need to maintain a carefully crafted image, take on false airs, or play a public role, Mailer presents himself as immune to the demands of his critics, his readers, and, most importantly, the market—a strange thing to do in a text entitled "Advertisements for Myself." Featuring the notorious essay "The White Negro," in which Mailer envisions the black hipster as a natural Method actor, *Advertisements* piggy-backs onto the paradoxical association that it delineates between the black subject as authentic and the black subject as performer in order to open up a space between reality and fantasy that Mailer can use to both political and profitable ends. Honing his ability to take on a variety of roles in the public eye as his celebrity grew in the 1960s, Mailer inspired the BBC documentary *Will the Real Norman Mailer Please Stand Up?* (1968) and inspired Laura Adams to comment that "it would appear that [Mailer's] only consistency has been in deviating from commonly accepted literary manners"¹ in the introduction to her 1974 anthology of the same name.

Meeting direct cinema film-maker D.A. Pennebaker in the middle of the decade, Mailer began testing the individual's ability to seem authentic and keep "cool" in the sights of the film camera. Making and starring in his third film, *Maidstone* (1970), Mailer finally got a chance to turn the cameras on the countercultural agenda for which he had recently become a figurehead. Creating a record of the creative and often violent authority that always exists behind the image of "the real," *Maidstone* reveals the ways in which the counterculture's utopian vision of reality is just another ideological construct that, unfortunately, often emulates the mainstream social hierarchies it claims to oppose. But in the end, *Maidstone* is most memorable for what it tells us about Mailer himself. Finally showing audiences what seems to "really" be the "real" Mailer—a Mailer who seems anything but cool—*Maidstone* manifests Mailer's own masterful manipulation of the fine line between representation and reality that made his authorial career a media success. Locating both individual freedom and political power in the ability to pass the real off as simulation and simulation off as the real, *Maidstone* reminds us that Mailer matters because he used his celebrity to demonstrate the individual's potential for resisting authority and redefining reality—even if this potential could only be practically realized by an elite few.

Black Brando as existential hero: "The White Negro" and the method actor

Longtime friends with famous Method actors Marlon Brando and Montgomery Clift, Mailer started attending a playwright's group at the Actors Studio in 1957 in order to work on transforming his novel *The Deer Park* into a stage production.² Developed by the Russian actor Konstantin Stanislavsky and brought to the United States by Lee Strasberg, the founder of the Actors Studio, Method acting provided a technique for connecting with the unconscious desires and emotions that capitalist culture repressed, allowing the actor to get in touch with his "authentic" self. Encouraging actors to resist "social pressures that impose standards appropriate merely to [a character's] external identity."³ Method acting, as cultural historian Krin Gabbard argues, became increasingly popular during the 1960s as a growing fascination with unearthing a real human nature, uninhibited by social convention or cultural constraint, became more prevalent, and it was often associated with the black subject, whose marginalized social existence seemed to make freedom from social conventions possible.⁴ With Marlon Brando as the exemplary Method actor who, as Gabbard argues, frequently used gestures and postures stereotypically tied to black masculinity in his portrayal of white masculine characters, Method acting, in an ideological reversal of historical reality, made the authentic seem accessible and acceptable via the performance of the liberated and performative "black" self inside the repressed white subject.

The same year that he joined the Actors Studio, Mailer wrote "The White Negro." As cultural historian Eric Lott argues in his essay "White Like Me," "The White Negro" participates in a long tradition of blackface minstrelsy that goes back to the eighteenth century, in which white men both appropriate and perform black masculinity as a means of fulfilling their own repressed, sexual desires.⁵ "The White Negro" updates that tradition by reinterpreting black masculinity as the ultimate symbol not only of sexuality but of self-reproduction and reinvention. Unafraid "to swing with the rhythms of another" in hopes of "making the new habit, unearthing the new talent."⁶ Mailer's Negro is depicted as both a kind of natural-born Method actor and a symbol of the radical creative freedom that Mailer was searching to represent in his own work. Detailing the ways in

which the Negro seems to be able to take on the philosophical outlook, tone, and even the dialect of whomever he is talking to—the most prescient example is the anecdote that Mailer tells about a black man imitating the affected accent of a young white co-ed in order to sleep with her⁷—Mailer represents the Negro-as-Method-actor as the ultimate master of performance, self-invention, and existential freedom. Attributing “that muted animal voice which shivered the national attention when first used by Marlon Brando” to the hipster in “Hipster and Beatnik: A Footnote to ‘The White Negro,’”⁸ Mailer makes the association between the Negro, the hipster, and the Method actor clear.

Republishing “The White Negro” in the 1959 anthology *Advertisements for Myself*, Mailer began to represent himself as both a white Negro and a professional performer, an authentic author-as-actor, who “keeps it real” while also always keeping his own performativity in play. In the opening “First Advertisement” of the anthology, Mailer acknowledges that modernist authors had to carefully maintain their public images in order to be successful, but he also seems to instinctively understand that a new breed of what we might retrospectively call “postmodern” authors are most successful when they manifest a willingness to perform outside of and in contradiction to cultural convention and consumer demand. As Mailer writes:

I, in my turn, would love to be one of the colorful old men of American letters, but I have a changeable personality, a sullen disposition, and a calculating mind. . . . Perhaps I should hire a public relations man to grease my career, but I do not know if I can afford him (not with the size of the job he would have to do for me), and moreover I would be obliged sooner or later to spoil his work. While there would be hardly a limit to how lovable he could make me in the public eye it would be exhausting for me to pretend to be nicer than I really am. Indeed, it would be downright debilitating to the best of my creative energies.⁹

In a book entitled *Advertisements for Myself*, it is hard to know how to take this rejection of commercial advertising except as a tongue-in-cheek acknowledgment of Mailer’s own awareness that what sells best in America at the start of the 1960s is the posture of nonconformity, of reality itself. Unlike the modernist author who worked hard to present a consistent and polished public face to his adoring fans, the postmodern author must advertise his existential potential, his freedom of self-expression, and his refusal to bow down to any but his own authentic desires—in other words, his “realness.” Selling his books by advertising both his own changeability (the entire text of *Advertisements* is an index of Mailer’s personal ups and downs, his literary coups and his literary blowouts) and his own uncivilized authenticity, both of which are constantly belied by Mailer’s fairly consistent and distinguished style and highly-educated prose, Mailer associates himself with authenticity but also performance, giving himself room to declare his own writing sincere or a set-up at any moment.

Consequently, though “The White Negro” has often been read as a racist treatise that reveals Mailer’s own failure to recognize the kind of damage that an association of an abstract black subject with primal and uncivilized desire inflicts upon real, black individuals, it may also be possible to read “The White Negro” as an attempt to open up a performative space for both “white negroes” and black subjects to use at their own discretion. In other words, by depicting the black subject as ambiguously suspended between the real and the performative, between authenticity and acting, much as he depicts himself, Mailer opens up a gap through which the power of the subject to define which aspects of his or her existence are real and which are performed can emerge. But in his response to Mailer’s essay entitled “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” James Baldwin astutely points out the problem with this tactic:

The roles that we construct are constructed because we feel that they will help us to survive and also, of course, because they fulfill something in our personalities; and one does not, therefore, cease playing a role simply because one has begun to understand it. All roles are dangerous. The world tends to trap and immobilize you in the role you play; and it is not always easy—in fact, it is always extremely hard—to maintain a kind of watchful, mocking distance between oneself as one appears to be and oneself as one actually is.¹⁰

Here, Baldwin calls Mailer out for pandering to a market obsessed with commodifying the “authenticity” of the repressed at the expense of any awareness of the “real” material and historical inequalities that shape the experience of racial subjects, and he acknowledges the violence with which the largely white, mainstream media, of which Mailer is a part, traps marginalized subjects in static and stereotypical roles. Realizing that Mailer’s writing on black experience is part of a larger attempt to figure out “how power works,”¹¹ Baldwin acknowledges the black subject and, as he puts it, “the middle-class Jew[s]” shared interest in cultural and political resistance,¹² but he also acknowledges Mailer’s superior cultural agency and more fluid social mobility that make roles easier to exchange and reality easier to manipulate.

In 1960, Mailer partnered with City Lights to release a paperback printing of “The White Negro” On the cover is a photographic negative, the inverted image of a white man whose skin is an

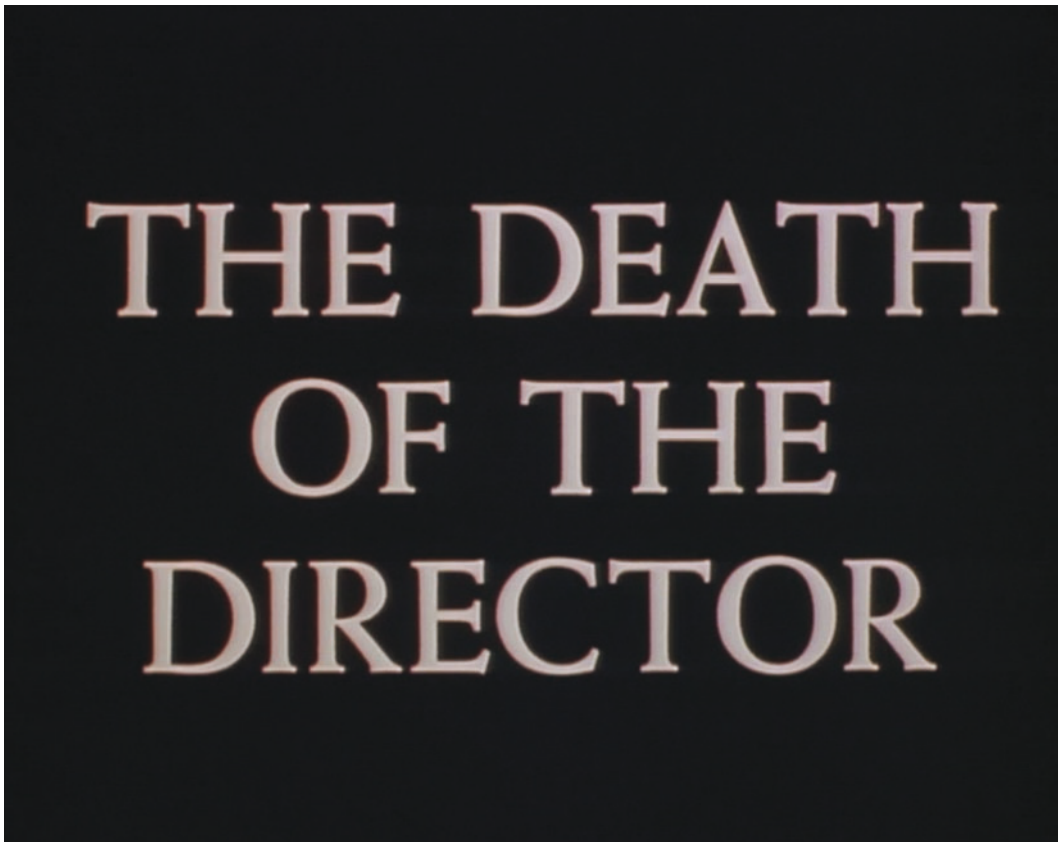


Figure 8.1 “The Death of the Director.” Chapter title card from *Maidstone* (1970). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

uncanny black and whose hair is a gleaming white. Revealing the white man's unconscious desires for blackness, the image is an almost too perfect example of the link between what Marxist scholar and philosopher Walter Benjamin calls "the optical unconscious," that "[other] nature which speaks to the camera as opposed to the eye"¹³ and the psychological unconscious. Revealing the white artist's repressed desire for black authenticity, the negative uses the inverted image of the white subject to bring both repressed visions and repressed desires to the surface of the reader's consciousness. Though this cover photograph is sometimes confused with an image of Mailer himself, the photographic negative is actually a self-portrait of Harry Redl, a famous photojournalist of the 1960s. Seeming to present a portrait of himself to his readers, Mailer once again hides behind a facade and, this time, it is the white photographer, the subject conventionally held responsible for differentiating the "real" image from the fictional one that he chooses as his mask. Reflecting the cultural agency required to be able to consistently reorient the public indices of fiction and reality to meet one's own needs, the black negative of the white photographer also illuminates a symbolic system in which the black subject is given no choice, no control over how he or she is represented.

Reality testing: the violence of the cinematic apparatus and the resistance of the film actor

In addition to theorizing the optical unconscious of the camera, Benjamin theorized the violence of cinematic technology. Declaring that, "Magician is to surgeon as painting is to cinematographer,"¹⁴ Benjamin argues that the cinematic apparatus penetrates its subject in order to see inside of it, revealing the uncannily constructed nature of reality, at the very same time as the malleability of cinematic film enables its reconstruction and representation in the editing room. Pointing out the ideological function of the film editor, who constructs reality out of disparate images in order to suit his or her own purposes, Benjamin emphasizes the camera's ability to seem to provide unmediated access to the real at the very moment in which the real is mediated and, in fact, violated most thoroughly. Violently reconstructing, the cinematic apparatus also violently tests its subjects, challenging their ability to maintain their own humanity in the face of the technological apparatus. As Benjamin writes:

Film makes test performances capable of being exhibited, by turning that ability itself into a test. . . . To perform in the glare of arc lamps while simultaneously meeting the demands of the microphone is a test performance of the highest order. To accomplish it is to preserve one's humanity in the face of the apparatus.¹⁵

Recording the actor's ability to maintain a sense of his or her own "humanity," or authentic, subjective agency, even when confronted by the demands of the camera, film captures the actor's ability or inability to resist the piercing eye of the camera and maintain control over his or her own self-representation.

In the 1960s, the introduction of new editing technologies, like the tape splicer and the ability to print frameline markers and arrowheads on an editor's workprints, made it easier for film editors to easily differentiate and recombine shots to create new sequences of images¹⁶ and resulted in a new kind of documentary film editing that called attention to its own violent reconstruction of

reality. Slashing long shots, fracturing narrative continuity, and decimating the bodies of the most famous feature-film couple of the decade—*Bonnie and Clyde* (1967)—the new Hollywood cinema of the 1960s was not only more violent than the cinema of the 1950s but also more interested in conveying the visceral experience of violence to its viewers by editing the image in unconventional and non-narrative ways.¹⁷ Violating the continuity of the film body just as the violation of the human one was being played out on screen, the new Hollywood cinema was unmasking both the artificiality of historical narrative and the unified perspective of the individual human subject, bringing the constructed nature of the real to the screen's surface.

Meanwhile, the documentary film genre was undergoing similar transformations. Influenced by the French New Wave and *cinéma vérité*, direct cinema used new editing technologies, newly portable cameras, and new synch-sound recording equipment to create self-reflexive films that emphasized the role of the film editor as well as the cameraman and sound crew in the film production process. Established by Robert Drew, a photography editor at *Life Magazine*, direct cinema initially made its debut in *The Living Camera*, a series of made-for-television documentary films produced by *Time, Inc.* Using editing to impose what Drew called “a crisis-structure” on to the indexical footage of reality, direct cinema created entertaining and suspenseful narratives out of everyday events through a choppy editing style that called attention to the act of editing itself. Reveling in the grainy image, imperfect sound, and unpredictable occurrences that come when shooting outside the controlled environment of the film studio and often including images of the cameraman and sound crew within the final version of the film, direct cinema attempted to woo audiences by providing a behind-the-scenes look at the violent construction of documentary film itself.¹⁸

Mailer was introduced to D.A. Pennebaker, a budding celebrity film-maker who had worked with Robert Drew on *The Living Camera* series, in the mid-1960s. Willing to put up \$1,500 in order to purchase film stock, Mailer was quickly able to persuade Pennebaker to donate his services free of charge to the making of Mailer's first film, *Wild 90*. Like Mailer's two films that would follow, *Wild 90* relied on the self-reflexive aesthetic techniques of direct cinema to convey a loose, fictional narrative plot fleshed out by Method acting-inspired improvisation. This combination of documentary aesthetics and fictional performance was a result of Mailer's understanding of the performativity of social existence and social reality. In his essay “Some Dirt in the Talk,” Mailer writes, “Acting is not only the preserve and torture rack of the professional actor, but is also what we do when we enter into new relations with man, mate, associate, or child.”¹⁹ For Mailer, most middle class, white Americans were confined to monotonous roles that they were compelled to perform day in and day out. Mailer believed that the free improvisation of the Method actor, which he had advocated in “The White Negro,” might help subjects to get in touch with their authentic humanity, their true existential potential, allowing them to be more “real” than they would be if they were asked to “play” themselves in a conventional documentary film.

In essence then, Mailer uses the improvisational fictional film as a kind of social psychology experiment, not unlike those of Stanley Milgram and Philip Zimbardo that bookended the decade. Conducting a series of experiments in which test subjects were asked to administer electric shocks to fellow test subjects (who were actually plants) on the command of an authoritative administrator, Stanley Milgram famously demonstrated how hard it was for individuals to resist authority, even when it contradicted their personal, ethical values, in 1960. Similarly, Philip Zimbardo's 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment would impressively reveal how quickly individuals adapt to roles—in this case, those of prisoners and prison guards—even when those roles violate the subjects own sense of self. Using theatrical staging and dramatic manipulation to generate insight into social

reality, Milgram and Zimbardo used hidden cameras to record what their experiments revealed and often found that test subjects were unable to maintain a sense of self when confronted by the authoritative pressure to perform and conform in certain ways. Inspired by the Eichmann trial and the Nazi atrocities of World War II,²⁰ these experiments revealed how easily previously nonviolent German citizens might have been converted to violence by the power of social authority alone.²¹

Unfortunately, if Mailer's films attempt to test his cast members abilities to resist authority and exert individual agency, the cast members usually fail. In his first two films, it is Mailer the authoritarian director who manages to not only take over the film but to cow his fellow cast mates into submission. In *Wild 90*, Mailer and his actor friends Buzz Farbar and Mickey Knox play mafia hit men hiding out in a small New York apartment for three days in order to escape the police. Inspired by a game of gangster play-pretend that Mailer shared over drinks with Farbar and Knox, *Wild 90* was designed to be the collective project of three drinking buddies, a communal artwork in which power was equally distributed and democratically shared. Giving Farbar and Knox equal leeway to improvise and direct the plot in whatever way they saw fit, Mailer, nevertheless, ends up exerting an unfair influence over the other actors when on screen and over the film's editing in post-production. While *Wild 90* sets out as an experiment in democratic creativity, the film actually reveals Mailer's authority over a supposedly shared artistic project and the cast members inability to resist his commands.

In his second film *Beyond the Law* (1968), Mailer takes the concept of "experimental cinema" literally, developing a narrative scenario that more explicitly puts himself and his cast to the test.



Figure 8.2 Kingsley the director is dead in the *Maidstone* (1970) chapter. Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

Anticipating Zimbardo's Prison Experiment, Mailer broke his cast of friends and family members into two groups—half the cast played arrested criminals and half the cast played cops—and hired Pennebaker and Leacock to record what would ensue. Like the Stanford prison simulation which had to be called off because the subjects playing prison guards were becoming so domineering and sadistic that they were starting to cause actual trauma to the subjects playing prisoners, *Beyond the Law*, as its name suggests, shows how quickly violent behavior can arise in previously nonviolent subjects when social (and in this case, directorial) authority commands it. As a short interview at the end of the 2006 Cine Malta DVD release of the film shows, even Mailer was not immune to the effects of the simulation he had constructed. Sharing what seems to be a somewhat painful memory, Mailer recounts his decision to cast a friend he had always suspected of being secretly gay as a criminal brought up on charges of male prostitution:

There was one fellow, I remember, who had spent his life not being homosexual. . . . You could tell that the drama of his life was that he did not want to become a homosexual, had succeeded in not being a homosexual. And, with the real cruelty of a director, I decided that he would be arrested that night for having solicited in a men's restroom in a subway. I didn't tell him this until he was in the scene, and he was so furious at me. I remember that I was [playing] the interrogating detective, and at a certain point, he tried to lay his hands on me. At which point, I slapped him with my hat, or was about to, I don't recall now. What I clearly remember was the impulse that I had—this was a good friend!—to hit him with the felt hat that I was wearing on my head, to take it off and slap his face with it because he had dared to touch me as a cop.²²

In this instance, Mailer's own acting performance reveals an underlying desire to assert his own authority over those around him that overcomes and overwhelms his desire to create a democratic, communal performance. While Mailer had pitched *Beyond the Law* as a democratic project in which cast and crew would work cooperatively to create a collective final product, Mailer's "cop" brings his own conformity to social authority and social suggestion to the screen's surface, and shows that even one of America's most innovative authors could not always "keep it real" when confronted by the power of social authority and the penetrating eye of the camera.

Mailer's *Maidstone*: "a commando raid on the nature of reality"

By the time the filming of *Maidstone* began in 1968, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Bobby Kennedy had already been assassinated. Shot on a hotel balcony in Memphis, Tennessee, the night before he was to lead a march in support of a sanitation workers' strike, King died within an hour of the assassin's bullet piercing his face and neck. Shot three times at the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles just after winning California's democratic presidential primary, Bobby Kennedy was hit once in the head and twice in the back within feet of news reporters and cameramen. On August 10, 1968 media studies superstar Marshall McLuhan published an article in *The Saturday Evening Post* in response to Bobby Kennedy's death. For McLuhan, Kennedy's assassination left a gaping hole in the political field, as all of the other presidential hopefuls were too "hot" for the new electronic medium. For McLuhan, television is a "cool" medium that instigates an interest in the cool candidate, capable of maintaining his composure in any situation and resisting or, at least, seeming to resist

the demands of the public—in other words, a candidate who could pass a screen test with flying colors and maintain his reality or “humanity” as Benjamin might have said, in the firing line of the camera. Declaring that, “In merely media terms, a Negro in the White House would have the most soothing and cooling effect on both national and international politics,”²³ McLuhan fingers the existential hero, the “white” Negro, that Mailer had written about a decade earlier, as the perfect presidential candidate for the electronic age.

Preceding McLuhan’s article by about a month, Mailer’s third film takes inspiration from the star power of Bobby Kennedy in order to set Mailer himself up as the nation’s next cool political candidate and to explore the reality of the counterculture’s dreams of a superman that could survive the test of the camera. But in contradiction to Mailer’s earlier films, *Maidstone* is less of an attempt to record the resistance of the screen actor on film than to represent the inevitable destruction of the performing subject under the persistent gaze of the camera eye. Watching the news of Kennedy’s death on television, Mailer claimed to feel a sense of guilt “from years of living with Kennedy jibes and making some of them himself.”²⁴ For Mailer, the violent impetus manifested by the Kennedy’s assassination was a result of American culture’s obsession with testing the hero and cracking the celebrity facade, an activity in which Mailer’s own journalism was complicit. A madcap adventure in which Mailer runs the risk of being assassinated in real life while playing a character who is almost assassinated on film, *Maidstone* is a film that was inspired by the string of assassinations that took place both on and off screen during the 1960s, and it attempts to demonstrate the violence of both media representations and those who have the cultural authority and technological power to shape them.

And yet, *Maidstone* is not only a test of Mailer’s own star power. It is also a test of the counterculture’s ideology, an attempt to see whether or not the political equality and social freedoms that the counterculture seemed to promise could actually hold up under the spotlights. “A commando raid on the nature of reality,” as Mailer dubbed it, *Maidstone* tests the objectives of the New Left counterculture by putting them into practice. Though in previous films Mailer had given his actors free reign to improvise lines and plot twists, here Mailer takes his efforts to create a democratic artistic process to a new level. Naming four cast members co-directors, Mailer assigns each of his co-directors a camera crew and soundman so that they can perform and shoot their scenes without his input or awareness.²⁵ A film about the rise of the counterculture and its utopian visions of participatory democracy, *Maidstone* is Mailer’s attempt to put those visions into action. Similarly, in the films within films that makeup *Maidstone*’s complex narrative, the contemporary power structure of America is reversed giving both blacks and women equality to if not authority over white men. Such a reversal is meant to test the countercultural hypothesis that, like the individual human subject, power hierarchies and social structures are flexible and alterable. With black men supposedly functioning as a powerful political faction in Kingsley’s campaign and women supposedly asserting both economic and sexual dominance over men at the brothel, *Maidstone* is a cinematic experiment that puts the counterculture’s own potential to the test.

In brief, the central plot of *Maidstone* is as follows: celebrated author and budding film director Norman Mailer stars in a documentary film about the making of a fictional, improvisational film in which he plays the role of Norman T. Kingsley. Kingsley, an eccentric avant-garde film director with a “‘melting pot’ background,”²⁶ is the hipster hero from Mailer’s “The White Negro” come to life. Producing, directing, and starring in his own sexploitation film about a male brothel with a female clientele, Kingsley is preparing to play the brothel’s male madam. Caught up in the trials and tribulations of movie production, Kingsley is also trying to decide whether or not he should embark on a campaign to become the next President of the United States. And of course, since Kingsley

is a presidential candidate based on the late Kennedys, he is susceptible to numerous assassination attempts from any of his many friends, relatives, employees, and lobbyists. Whether or not assassination will actually be attempted and whether or not an assassination attempt will actually be successful is left up to the improvising actors to work out in the heat of the dramatic moment.

Scenes in which Kingsley interacts with female actors and black lobbyists reveal how the counterculture's dreams of race and gender equality fail to fully account for the complex problems of political and cultural representation. In the process of casting his film, Kingsley denigrates female actors' appearances, mocks their professional acting ambitions, and demands that they be willing to take their clothes off at a moment's notice if they want to be given the chance to participate in his film. Part of Mailer's "fictional" performance, Kingsley's comments on the imperfections of the female actors bodies and acting skills could easily have been painful in real life and demonstrate the cost to women of participating in both Kingsley's film and Mailer's. Similarly, when talking with potential black voters about his presidential candidacy, Kingsley acknowledges that he has little understanding of poverty or marginalization, but he reminds the young black voter that he is talking to them, "I'm saying that I think I can do as much for you as the next white man. Until you people have the power to have a black man for President, you have to consider whether you want to vote at all for any white man at all."²⁷ Though Kingsley is set up as the "White Negro" candidate, even he has to acknowledge that are problems with electing a seemingly white film-maker as a representative of the black populace when his electability results from an excess of the very cultural authority that black subjects lack. Even in the countercultural utopia of *Maidstone* in which women and blacks seem to be given equal access to representational technology and screen time, it is really always Kingsley/Mailer, the media manipulator and celebrity candidate, who maintains ultimate control.

The source of suspense in *Maidstone* is the possibility of Kingsley's assassination and, due to the nested narratives that confuse the "real" Norman Mailer with Kingsley and, in turn, Kingsley with his own performance of a male madam, it seems possible that a fictional assassination attempt could morph into a real one. The suspense over Kingsley's potential assassination peaks in a scene in which Kingsley/Mailer stands on stage in front of a large audience of revelers, courting both fake and real assassination attempts. This potentially revolutionary and potentially deadly conflation of fact and fiction comes to an abrupt halt when a black male actor portraying a potential assassin makes an attempt on Kingsley's life, but this unnamed actor is quickly apprehended, and the audience never hears from him again. As a result of the editing of the film, audiences are given no backstory on this actor, no information about what happens to him after his assassination attempt, and even the attempt itself is hardly visible. The lack of footage of this black actor resonates with a power structure that exists outside the film and a television media that is only galvanized to report on the black community when it is responsible for violently rupturing the placid surface of the consumer spectacle.

Although it is a black cast member who takes it upon himself to improvise an assassination attempt on Kingsley's life, it is finally and, not surprisingly, Rip Torn who gives Mailer his due after the debriefing session is over. Having played Kingsley's potentially jealous brother Raoul Rey O'Houlihan throughout the film, Torn is clearly set up to function as Kingsley's double. In the final scene in *Maidstone*, Torn attacks Mailer after film production has supposedly concluded but while the cameras are still rolling. Wearing his "male madame" costume, consisting of leather vest, leather cap, and tight cut-off dungarees, giving the whole scene a slightly erotic undertone, Mailer appears unaware of Torn until he is too close to be deterred. Entering the shot from off camera and striking Mailer on the head with a hammer violently enough to draw blood, Torn declares: "You're



Figure 8.3 Rip Torn grabs the hammer out of a satchel that he will attack Kingsley/Mailer with in the finale of *Maidstone* (1970). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

supposed to die, Mr. Kingsley. You must die, not Mailer, I don't want to kill Mailer, but I must kill Kingsley in this picture."²⁸ With Mailer's family standing only feet away, Mailer and Torn wrestle to the ground, clawing at each other as the cameras continue to roll.

By the end of the fight, brought about by the physical intervention and blood-curdling screams of Mailer's wife Beverly Bentley, Mailer is bleeding from the hammer-hit to the head, Torn is bleeding from the ear—Mailer bit him—and the Mailer children are screaming and crying in fear for their father's life. The scene ends with Mailer and Torn arguing and calling each other names. Torn pleads that he was acting for the benefit of the film and never meant to kill Mailer but only to realistically fake Kingsley's assassination. Mailer shouts back, in characteristic Mailer fashion, "It was my picture, and I knew what I was doing with it, and what makes sense, and what don't."²⁹ Interestingly, Mailer seems most upset, not about his head wound, but about having had his wife defend him and his children witness his loss of authoritative control and physical prowess. The scene ends with Mailer and Torn exchanging profanities until Mailer regains power over his picture and figuratively assassinates his would-be assassin by directing the cameras not to shoot. But, before he does so, Mailer is recorded decisively declaring that this footage will never make it into the film's final cut.

Though Mailer could easily have edited this section of footage out of the final cut of the film, he chooses to leave it in. Revealing both Mailer's own vulnerability and the vulnerability of participatory

democracy to authoritarian leaders and dictatorial editing, *Maidstone* unmask the utopian fantasies of the counterculture by illuminating the social complexities the New Left has yet to resolve. Just as Mailer and his editorial team failed to cut a film that focuses on the storyline of the black assassin, the white youth movement, like Students for a Democratic Society and the Yippies, drew attention to their own political agendas and their own sense of alienation, often overshadowing the very race-based civil rights movements they were hoping to help in the first place.³⁰ Similarly, shamed by Torn's uprising that transforms Mailer the celebrity author and budding film director into Mailer the victim, Mailer hopes to cut Torn's image out of the film entirely. Revealing the power dynamics at play in the editing, collation, and public distribution of information, *Maidstone* holds up a mirror to the American media as well as the counterculture, revealing its hidden tactics for creating an image of "reality" that suits its own ideological needs.

With its title gesturing towards the myth of the Medusa, *Maidstone* seems to enact the existential interpretation of the gorgon's petrifying power that Sartre makes in *Being and Nothingness*: "The Other by rising up confers on the for-itself a being-in-itself—in-the-midst-of-the-world as a thing among things. This petrification in in-itself is the profound meaning of the myth of Medusa."³¹ As Sartre scholar Hazel Barnes suggests, this passage demonstrates the power of the Other to dehumanize and objectify the subject, robbing him of his performative agency. As Barnes explains:

For Sartre, my realization of the Other's existence as an independent subjectivity beyond my reach occurs simultaneously with my discovery that I, who am always and solely a free subject so long as I live nonreflectively, can be turned into an object for another and viewed from the outside. . . . Worse yet, insofar as I have been in the habit of assigning to other people their place in the world of my mind and emotions, so I find that I am made part of the furnishings of the Other's world. The Look of the Other, which reveals to me my object side, judges me, categorizes me. . . . It threatens, by ignoring my free subjectivity, to reduce me to the status of a thing in the world. In short, it reveals my physical and my psychic vulnerability.³²

In the editing room, Mailer finally catches a glimpse of himself outside himself: he is a piece of footage, a material object helpless to resist the sharp edge of the editing scissors. With his indexical image functioning like a second hammer hit to the head, Mailer suddenly sees the cultural disparities that give him almost unrivaled control over his public image and finally realizes, as Baldwin had put it years ago, that "All roles are dangerous . . . and it is not always easy—in fact, it is always extremely hard—to maintain a kind of watchful, mocking distance between oneself as one appears to be and oneself as one actually is."³³ Finally understanding that, in a media-saturated society, one's identity is defined by the way others see it and is not, finally, a self-determined product, *Maidstone* chips away at Mailer's dreams of social resistance and individual authenticity by showing him the power of authority to remake the real in the editing room and, perhaps, makes him reconsider the politics of both Method acting and "The White Negro" in the process.

Conclusion: authorizing the real

Because Mailer had associated his campaign to be "one of the colorful old young men of American letters"³⁴ with a campaign for the presidency since *Advertisements for Myself*,³⁵ *Maidstone* is also a film about authorship. In 1968, the same year that *Maidstone* was filmed, Roland Barthes tolled



Figure 8.4 Kingsley/Mailer turns his back on performance inside of direct cinema in *Maidstone* (1970). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

the death knell of the author. No longer the ultimate signification behind the literary work, the author was now a “scriptor,” who replaced authorial self-expression with nothing but “a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred.”³⁶ The post-mortem and postmodern author was, for Barthes, total facade, a mere mouthpiece through which signs and meanings, flowed freely, circulating out to a newly empowered, reading public. Promising readers a new kind of liberated mode of interpretation, “The Death of the Author” prophesied the emancipation of the author from the kind of invasive reading of the written word that associated the text with the author himself.

But of course such superhuman freedom is finally inhuman, as Foucault would emphasize by redubbing the dead author the “author-function” in his 1969 essay “What is an Author?” No author or celebrity figure, not even Mailer, can completely and consistently resist the petrifying eye of the camera, the piercing biographical analysis of the critic, and the violent curiosity of the public, all of which aim to root out the “real” identity of the individual by penetrating his or her boundaries and cracking his or her facades. The closest thing the author can get to the freedom of death is to walk the fine line between reality and fiction, between performance and authenticity, always keeping the public guessing and keeping the author in control.

Not surprisingly then, debates about whether the final scene of *Maidstone* is spontaneous or planned, real or faked, continue on even now, forty-some years after the film was made. Though Mailer’s anguish and surprise in the scene seem real and though Mailer, in his retrospective essay

on the making of the film, reports that the attack was entirely unexpected, Patricia Bosworth in *Vanity Fair* reports that:

The night before shooting ended, Torn met with Mailer and the other associate directors about how to do the final scene. Mailer and the others thought, “they should do Mailer’s character in with stoning,” Torn says, but he “argued that you can’t control a stoning, that Norman could get killed.” Torn then came up with the idea of using a hammer.³⁷

In this rendition of the events leading up to the attack, Norman knew what was coming. And so, what seems at first to be a revelation of the “real” Norman Mailer, is, perhaps, finally just another performance, an impressive manipulation in which direct cinema, like the counterculture, fails to live up to its revolutionary promise of candidness and Mailer regains his own celebrity cool. But in the wake of Mailer’s passing in 2007, the ambiguity of *Maidstone*, the uncertainty of whether Mailer was out of the loop or in on the joke is what keeps his memory in motion. Flickering between the false and the real, Mailer’s image lives, illuminating the problems with media authority, the complexities of representational resistance, and the political power of realizing that reality and performance can be intimately and pragmatically intertwined.

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- 7 Mailer, Norman (1959), *Advertisements For Myself*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 351.
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- 10 Mailer, Norman (1959), *Advertisements For Myself*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 21–2.
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- 12 Baldwin, James (1998), “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy,” in *James Baldwin: Collected Essays*, New York: Literary Classics of the United States: 279.
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- 17 Monaco, Paul (2001), *History of the American Cinema: The Sixties, 1960–1980, Vol. 8*, Berkeley, University of California Press: 88.
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- 19 Barsam, Richard M. (1973), *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History, Revised and Expanded*, Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press: 303.
- 20 Mailer, Norman (1972), "Some Dirt in the Talk" in *Existential Errands*, Boston: Little, Brown: 116.
- 21 Franklin, Ruth (2010), *A Thousand Darknesses: Lies and Truth in Holocaust Films*, New York: Oxford University Press: 211–13. As a Jewish-American, Mailer too voiced concern about the conformity of the average American citizen and his or her inability to resist social authority, and he did so most memorably in "The White Negro" itself: "The Second World War presented a mirror to the human condition which blinded anyone who looked at it. . . . One could hardly maintain the courage to be individual, to speak with one's own voice, for the years in which one could complacently accept one's self as part of an elite by being a radical were forever gone. A man knew that when he dissented, he gave a note upon his life which could be called in any year of overt crisis. No wonder then that these years have been the years of conformity and depression" (*Advertisements*: 338).
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- 23 McLuhan, Marshall (1968), "All of the Candidates Are Asleep," in *Saturday Evening Post*, August 10, 1968: 34–6.
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- 34 Mailer, Norman (1959), *Advertisements For Myself*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 21.
- 35 Mailer, Norman (1959), *Advertisements For Myself*, New York: Putnam & Sons: 17.
- 36 Barthes, Roland (1978), "The Death of the Author," in *Image, Music, Text*, Stephen Heath, trans., New York: Hill and Wang: 147.
- 37 Bosworth, Patricia (2008), "Mailer's Movie Madness," in *Vanity Fair*, March, 2008. In 1959's *Advertisements for Myself*, Mailer claims to have already "been hit on the head by a hammer" (AFM: 22). In many ways, *Advertisements* seems to set up and foresee *Maidstone*, functioning as the literary doppelgänger that belies its realism.

9

MAIDSTONE: THE UNILINEAR ABSTRACT

John D'Amico

There is only one place to begin with *Maidstone* (1970)—the ending. On a bucolic summer afternoon in 1968, a young Rip Torn reaches into a backpack, removes a hammer, and swings it into Norman Mailer's head. The two men scuffle, bleeding and grunting on the lawn, Norman biting Rip's ear nearly clean off, while his family and a cameraman crowd around alternately screaming and standing in disbelief. Until its Eclipse DVD release in 2012, *Maidstone* was basically only available on the grey market for rare films in the United States or via the Region 2 European DVD, but one YouTube video of the so-called "*Maidstone* Brawl" has over 360,000 views to date.¹ This brawl is only about 11 minutes of a 110-minute film, but its reputation (one clip of which was even uploaded by Criterion, the publishers of the DVD) has overwhelmed memories of the film to a stunning degree. Most of the comments under the video are bewildered, unable to make sense of just what is happening. That bewilderment bedevils every frame of *Maidstone*, which stands as the more complicated and opaque films of any note.

Let's circle back to the beginning. In the 1960s, Norman Mailer became interested in film-making, in particular to the seemingly possibilities of editing. Mailer sought a different method; one not derived from the stage, and made three films exploring alternative ways of storytelling on film. In his afterward to the novelization of the film, Mailer offers us a lovely little twist on the Kuleshov effect—footage of a skier going downhill, he says, may be beautiful, but footage of a skier going downhill with the knowledge that it's a race offers tension as well as beauty. But if you alternate between telling the audience it *is* a race and it is *not* a race, "a fine slippery shiver of meaning comes over us because the situation has altered a little faster than our comprehension of it."²

The Achilles' Heel in production, as far as Mailer was concerned, is that every film (well, more or less) began with a script, with professional actors, and with a unified purpose of story revolving around central characters. Everything converged around a central perspective, so that the world of most films is basically hollow. Mailer called this phenomenon the "unilinear abstract" and asserted that such an approach was only capable of sparks of life, never a sustained feeling of the magical unpredictability of reality. "Perhaps," he said, "a thousand actors and two thousand films can be cited where the movie frame comes alive and there is no dip at the foot of consciousness because something is false at the root."

This isn't especially foreign soil for ambitious film-makers. As far back as 1919, editorial pioneer Dziga Vertov yearned to make films from the perspective of a machine eye, and in the 1980s philosopher Gilles Deleuze wrote two books examining in depth the different permutations of the

unilinear abstract—he called it “solid perception,” as opposed to the “liquid perception” of, for example, French Poetic Realism, and the ultimate panlinear abstract, “gaseous perception,” a form of looking that is unclouded by a central human operator.³

So, like many experimental film-makers before and since, from Dziga Vertov to Derek Jarman, Mailer sought a different method of production, one that would exploit this spirit of ambiguity about where reality ends and film begins. To that end he produced and directed *Wild 90* (1968) and *Beyond the Law* (1968), two mostly-improvised films that at their best crackled with a sense of unpredictably but are often garbled, inconsequential, and technically incomprehensible. If the demolition of the unilinear abstract were to go off, it would take more than a few nights in a dingy office building. *Maidstone* was Mailer’s third and final attempt at experimental cinema. It was by far his biggest production, not just in terms of capital expenses, but also the physical and emotional toll it took on its creators and the sheer mountain of footage produced. It took two years to edit. Editor Jan Welt estimated that the film-maker’s shot a total of 250,000 feet of 16mm film,⁴ which was wrestled first to three hours, then stripped down to its final 110-minute run time.⁵

To film his experiment, Mailer rented four estates in the Hamptons covering about 5 miles of contiguous grounds and on Wednesday July 17, 1968, welcomed a film crew of five different camera teams, including direct cinema pioneers D. A. Pennebaker and Richard Leacock fresh off their seminal concert film *Monterey Pop* (1968), alongside a loose cast of “fifty to sixty” actors, prizefighters, drug addicts, writers, and hangers-on, to the grounds. The next day, Mailer, in character as Norman T. Kingsley, sat with the assembled mass and laid out his vision for making the film. Cameramen would not fill scenes, but split up and follow the unprompted actions of different factions, like a cubist painting broken into multiple perspectives. He would not be the director, but the general the forefront of a military operation. This was not traditional cinema, but an “assault on reality” aimed at discovering that hidden truth that movies so fleetingly reach. He elaborates (*Maidstone* is famously opaque, but lucky for us, it’s full of manifestos):

Kingsley: I see an extraordinary apocalyptic time where the best and worst of people are both rising to the top in a great red.

Lady McCarthy: You might be right, you know.

Kingsley: Might be?

Lady McCarthy: And if you’re not?

Kingsley: I don’t know. I’m a catalyst; I set loose forces. If I’m not right, I’ll set loose terrible forces.⁶

This all seems a bit overwrought, but let’s take a step back and look at the landscape. *Maidstone* was filmed in July 1968, just one month after the assassination of Robert Kennedy and three months after the assassination of Martin Luther King. Mailer was steeped in political upheaval, having just finished *The Armies of the Night* and soon to begin *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, his impassioned you-are-there accounts of the riotous protests against the Vietnam War. Though it was first screened in 1970, distributed in 1971, *Maidstone* is awash in the rage and fear of 1968—rage and fear intimately tied with the sensation of being filmed in the midst of disaster. This was the month before chants of “The whole world is watching!” and “Look out, Haskell! It’s real!” in Chicago. Even the nightly news devolved into William F. Buckley threatening to “sock” Gore Vidal in his “goddamn face.”



Figure 9.1 Kingsley/Mailer details his intentions to run for president in *Maidstone* to Lady McCarthy who is played by Adeline Naiman, whom Mailer had known since the late 1940s. Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

Films of 1968 tend, therefore, toward an all-or-nothing atmosphere; from the apocalyptic *Night of the Living Dead* to the freak flag flying *Head* to the savage and surreal *If . . .*, *Maidstone* fits snugly amongst a year's roster of nerve-wracked cinema grasping desperately for a new way of living. Perhaps it's because I'm writing this in 2016, but I'm sympathetic to the cinematic excesses of a year when most people were nagged by the thought that there would not be an America in 1969. Stressed environments tend to create the most interesting art. The trade-off is that the sheer aggression at the root of *Maidstone* can be overwhelming.

1960s avant-garde cinema is often laughed off as druggy indulgence, but you must remember, these film-makers were born into a world where totalitarians like Hitler and Stalin were madly in love with perfectly ordered art as a tool of political oppression. The avant-garde is messy and non-Euclidean by design, as a political counterpoint to the geometric rationalism of "establishment" films like John Wayne's 1968 *The Green Berets*. Order is broken down to reveal the bad wood beneath the veneer of civility. Hollywood built an empire on the lovely subtle principles of invisible editing and cinematography that only ever calls attention to itself with quiet tact. Conventional cinema is a reflection of conventional warfare. Asymmetric anti-war cinema, the raw and disorienting cinema of *Maidstone*, is a reflection of "asymmetric warfare"⁷—a term coined by Andrew Mack in January 1975, just three months before the fall of Saigon.

The assault on reality begins. Norman T. Kingsley, we learn, is not just a film director with big plans for his pornographic remake of *Belle de Jour* (1967) (a grim-faced CIA suit compares Kingsley's work to Buñuel, Fellini, Carl Dreyer, and Antonioni—that's a veritable checklist of directors hunting for modes beyond Hollywood classicalism), but he is also a presidential candidate targeted for assassination by an organization with the delightfully Orwellian name "PAX,C" (Prevention of Assassination Experiments-Control). PAX,C is courting his brother Raoul Rey (Rip Torn) to kill him. Off-screen, Mailer primed the pump by making Rip Torn the head of Kingsley's Praetorian Guard and then randomly assigning each cast member either "for" or "against" killing Kingsley. Tension and uncertainty were paramount. *Beyond the Law* and *Maidstone* actress Lee Roscoe later said, "Norman liked to set up an atmosphere of danger. He liked to confuse the acted moment with reality. In his quest to understand American schizophrenia—he would try to create a schizophrenic atmosphere on the set. He did that by pitting one actor against another. He was organized, manipulative in an artistic way."⁸ *Maidstone* Production Manager Paul Austin concurred: "As I remember, everyone there took Norman's intention for the film very seriously. Everyone was in-tune with the experiment, and the experiment itself came very loaded with tension."⁹

Mailer was courting that tension from the beginning. Some of the first scenes in the film are of him needling and taunting actresses—Kingsley's first line in the film is him calling a woman a "ninny" if she won't take her clothes off for a scene, then he assures an actress he'll cast her despite her wrinkles. Moments later, when a black woman auditions, Kingsley code-switches to some horrible mutation of African American dialect and hisses that she must be "a slave to be a good actor." It seems shapeless but, editorially, there's method behind all the madness.

The last actress Kingsley sees is the first person to receive direction from him, and it's at this moment that the shape starts to emerge. Kingsley insists on improving the volume of her voice, instructing her to grunt and scream. From the very beginning, the goal is something primal, something beyond the control of words. We cut from their screams to a boxing match, where Kingsley's sparring partner, played by Edward Bonetti, gives Norman an illegal shot to the head. Norman punches the man in the mouth, accuses him of betraying him, and complains: "If you don't love me anymore, then who does?" This whole scenario plays out with eerie fidelity in the film's final reel, with Rip Torn replacing the sparring partner. Fifteen minutes have gone by, and the seeds for the ending are already in place. The structure is subtle, sort of a combination of the documentarian approach of discovering your subject in the edit, and the traditional approach of laying the seeds for your ending in your opening. It all shivers with impending violence, and in this powder keg of sexual, racial, and political tension, we meet Rip Torn, down by the river catching fish.

Rip was the key to it all. Most people remember him now as charmingly cantankerous in things like *Defending Your Life* (1991) or *Men In Black* (1997), but as his 2010 bank robbery arrest attests, those films belie a true volatility in full bloom in the 1960s. One need only watch him in the unforgettable *Naked City* episode "A Case Study of Two Savages" from 1962 or Cornel Wilde's *Beach Red* in 1967 to see the violence simmering just beneath the surface of his work.

During the *Maidstone* shoot, Torn was fresh off of his Obie-winning performance in Mailer's madhouse off-Broadway play *The Deer Park*, a somewhat incoherent attempt to, like *Maidstone*, explore sex and power politics. James Toback recalls of the play: "[H]e played Marion Faye, the pansexual pimp hero who gave eloquent expression to the psychopathic extremes—both sexual and political—of Mailer's personality,"¹⁰ unlike *The Deer Park*, had Mailer on hand to play his own sexual and political extremes, so Torn was pivoted into place as his foil instead of his stand-in. Mailer asked the cast to assassinate him and the gifted and frighteningly intense Rip Torn was willing to oblige.

For a week, Mailer courted disaster, getting stoned and discussing artistic principles even as a knife-wielding Hervé Villechaize had nearly drowned and actor Lane Smith was recovering from a broken jaw delivered by Mailer himself. It was all set to culminate in a Grand Ball at the expressionist artist Alfonso Ossorio's estate—an event that gathered all the splintered factions of the production around a top-hatted Kingsley. Jan Welt later recalled that Mailer “20% expected a bullet in the brain or a knife in the liver.”¹¹ But the ball fizzled. The great experiment of *Maidstone*, the cubist assassination documentary, amounted to little more than Norman's wife Beverly Bentley screaming about “freedom!” in a poorly lit room.

So, the next afternoon, as the cast and crew meandered away from Long Island, Rip Torn reached into his bag and took out a hammer. After spectators broke the two up, Rip insisted that he had made sure to hit with the flat of the hammer because he wasn't trying to kill Mailer, only Kingsley. Mailer (now fully out of character) was understandably furious, shouting “it was my picture and I knew what I was doing with it,” a sentiment that runs contrary to the entire week of work beforehand. Torn counters: “When is an assassination ever planned? It's done. That's your story, man. That's what you're pushing for. That's what you called me for.”

The film ends with Torn insisting it was just a stunt for the movie and Mailer insisting the movie was fine. And yet, it is the ending of *Maidstone*. And it is what Mailer said he was after, as far back as that afternoon on the grass when he worried he might “set loose terrible forces.”



Figure 9.2 Mailer behind the camera in outtake from *Maidstone* (1970). Frame enlargement from 16mm triacetate projection print. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

The footage of that week on Long Island would take two years to assemble, and the film community is still struggling to understand just what exactly happened. Since its release in 1970–71, *Maidstone* has been dismissed as an ego-trip—hopelessly confusing, even downright nonsensical. The reception was so cold and so financially ruinous to Mailer that it was his last attempt at directing for 20 years, and his last attempt at producing in his life. Rip Torn's career suffered, too. The ear Mailer bit got infected and the hospital time cost Torn the part Jack Nicholson played in *Easy Rider*. A year later, in 1969, Rip Torn would tear his way across the screen in Milton Moses Ginsberg's under-appreciated and aptly named *Coming Apart*, another improvised docudrama teasing out how to finally capture those subtler facets of the human psyche.

Despite its reputation, *Maidstone* is almost certainly the most personal and passionate of all the man's films. It is perhaps not a success in traditional terms, but it is not a film of traditional means so it is probably more honest accounting to consider it by its own standards.

Mailer went after truth and in the process almost became the first casualty of the cinematic revolution. For his efforts, we have a film of deep complications and occasional beauty. The spirit of experimentation that begat *Maidstone* gave us a few others like it—William Greaves' *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* (1968), Robert Kramer's *Ice* (1969) and *The Edge* (1968), Jim McBride's *David Holzman's Diary* (1967), and the aforementioned *Coming Apart* all explored the same fuzzy territory where the camera and the operator separate. Few films since then have been as overt in their fascination with that subject—George Kuchar's (very) short 1977 film *I, An Actress*, *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) and the supposedly forthcoming DAU by Ilya Khrzhanovsky are members of a small club of post-New Hollywood era films to test the unilinear abstract. But of them all, I know of no film that attacks the very nature of film as a medium with the savage energy of *Maidstone*.

Notes

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- 3 Deleuze, Gilles (1983), *Cinema 1: The Movement-image*, London: Athlone: 77.
- 4 Welt, Jan Pieter (1971), "Maidstone: The Film As Game," in *Filmmaker's Newsletter*, vol. 4, no. 11, October: 14–15.
- 5 Chaiken Michael (2009), "Editing Mailer: A Conversation with Jan Welt and Lana Jokel" in *The Mailer Review*, vol. 3, no.1, Tampa, FL: University of South Florida Press: 513.
- 6 Mailer, Norman (1971), "A Course on Film-making," in *Maidstone: A Mystery*, New York: Signet: 139–80.
- 7 Mack, Andrew J.R. (1975), "Why Big Nations Lose Small Wars," in *World Politics*, vol. 27, no. 2, January: 175–200.
- 8 Bozung, Justin (2014), Unpublished Interview with Actress Lee Roscoe, private collection, October.
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- 10 Toback, James (1968), "At Play in the Fields of the Bored," in *Esquire*, December: 43.
- 11 Welt, Jan Pieter (1971), "Maidstone: The Film As Game" in *Filmmaker's Newsletter*, vol. 4, no. 11, October: 14–15.

10

COMMANDO RAIDS ON THE NATURE OF REALITY

Gary D. Rhodes

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Films exist in many places. A film is in a reel stored inside of a can. A motion picture is encoded onto a shiny DVD that sparkles like a rainbow when held up to the light. But at the same time, those are just objects that contain films. We experience films not by staring at a reel or at a disc, but by gazing elsewhere, at a screen. But even the theater or television screen is not a film's permanent home, certainly not in the same way that a frame provides to a painting. No, at best it is a fragile, temporal relationship, with the film bounded by opening credits and fades-to-black. The film exists for a short while, until it reaches The End and the screen goes dark.

That is not to say that we don't try to provide frames for our cinematic paintings. We attempt to fix them in our memories, honing in, for example, on particular scenes that we like to recall, over and over again. Lines of dialogue as well, even when the memory that we create constitutes something different from our original experience with the film. Humphrey Bogart's "Rick" never actually said, "Play it again, Sam." in *Casablanca* (1942), but he certainly did—and continues to do—in our cultural memory. But perhaps our favorite way to combat the temporal is to hinge particular adjectives onto films, as if a single word or two can encapsulate what they are. Movie X is "heartwarming," it is "uplifting," it is—like so many other films before it, of course—"inspirational." By contrast, Movie Y is "bold" and "daring" and "original." And then of course there is the darker underbelly of cinema, as exemplified by Movie Z, which is "shocking" and "graphic" and—egad—"titillating." Running time runs, but we can screech the experience to a halt with such adjectives, equally suitable for use in our own conversations as they are for the text on movie posters and videotape boxes.

If most films exist (at least when they are not being viewed) as adjectives, I would argue that a small number are verbs. They just are. In some cases, like Bob Quinn's *Poitin* (1977) and the Coen Brothers' *No Country for Old Men* (2007), perhaps it is because they are so unadorned, so unvarnished, so raw, that they require no flowery adjectives. In other cases, ranging from *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) and *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (1920) to *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *À Bout de souffle* aka *Breathless* (1960), they exist as if they have always existed. And they exert a gravitational pull, causing so many other films to orbit around them, tied irrevocably to the gravity of their influence, which is so strong as to just be.

And then, well, there is Norman Mailer's 1970 film *Maidstone*. He directed the film and starred in it, both as the fictional character "Norman T. Kingsley," a movie director who runs for President of the United States, and as Norman Mailer, playing himself as the director of *Maidstone*. After limited engagements in 1971, the film essentially disappeared from sight until a DVD was released in France in 2006, which was followed by a number of public screenings, such as at the Lincoln Center's Walter Reade Theatre in 2007. For over three decades, before, *Maidstone* had no screen on which to appear; its running time had stopped, and words were all that it had.

Though Mailer would insist that the medium of film was "once removed from words," the words through which *Maidstone* existed during its hiatus were largely his own.¹ Mailer's essay "A Course on Film-Making," published in the *New American Review* in 1971, described his theory behind shooting *Maidstone*. He would re-print the essay that same year in his book *Maidstone: A Mystery*, which also printed the film's dialogue and stage directions, transcribed after the fact since *Maidstone* did not have a shooting script. Many words, to be sure, but one in particular surfaces repeatedly. Not an adjective or even a verb, but a noun: for Norman Mailer, *Maidstone* was a "raid."

More specifically, it was "analogous to a military operation, to a commando raid on the nature of reality—[the persons involved in making the film] would discover where reality was located by the attack itself, just as a company of Rangers might learn that the enemy was located not in the first town they invaded but another."² Or as Mailer (while playing himself as film director) would say in a scene in *Maidstone*:

We made a movie by a brand new process. . . . Now what we did is we made a movie as a military operation. When you have a military operation, what happens is you set out to take a given town and your objective is to take that town, and as you go forward all sorts of unforeseen contingencies arrive, and as they do you go around them, or you go through them or you go under them.

Around the unforeseen contingencies, through them, under them. For Mailer, *Maidstone* was something far more than a single film. It was an important opportunity to put his theory of film-making into practice.

Operation Leviathan

Maidstone tells the story of film director Norman T. Kingsley, who mounts his new movie while simultaneously considering a run for the presidency of the United States. Though Kingsley promises his new film will not be "sexploitation," it is set in a bordello and features nudity and copulation. While working on it, Kingsley meets with a number of supporters and detractors for his emerging political career, ranging from the president of a women's college to a group of young African-Americans.

Fearful that Kingsley might actually get elected, a group of "High Officials" contemplates an assassination attempt. And we soon learn that many others might be plotting against Kingsley as well. Rumors suggest that TV reporter Jeanne Cardigan (Lady Jean Campbell) could be a member of an organization that inadvertently encourages assassinations. And then there is the Cashbox, a kind of Rat Pack that hangs around Kingsley, headed by his half-brother Raoul Rey O'Houlihan (Rip Torn). Kingsley purports to have them under control, but they are clearly a dangerous group. The film director's life is plainly at risk.



Figure 10.1 Mailer and his underwater camera ready at the Ossorio Estate in outtake from *Maidstone* (1970). Frame enlargement from 16mm triacetate projection print. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

Mailer chose to film *Maidstone* with no script, using a combination of professional actors (such as Ultra Violet, fresh from her work with Andy Warhol, and Hervé Villechaize, later famous as Tattoo on TV's *Fantasy Island*) and amateurs (including two of his ex-wives, his then-current wife, his mistresses, and the owners of the *Maidstone* estates where the film would be shot and from which it would take its title). During the filming, rumor had it that at least one cast member was armed, and there was little doubt that others engaged in all sorts of debauchery. Sex, drugs, and booze; according to one anecdote, Villechaize nearly drowned in a swimming pool.³

Five groups of cinematographers followed the actions of the large cast for one week of shooting, each group operating independently of one another. They included D.A. Pennebaker (who had directed *Monterey Pop* in 1968, a film Mailer had much admired, as well as *Don't Look Back* in 1967), and Ricky Leacock (who had helped shoot *Monterey Pop*). Both men had played key roles in the *cinéma vérité* documentary movement.

As much as anything else, that movement inspired Mailer. Handheld cameras and handheld sound recorders allowed for small, mobile crews, offering what at least seemed to be unfettered access to "reality." Using natural lighting, shooting could take place easily, including in confined spaces. It could occur hour after hour. And it could even occur surreptitiously, as one young

woman engaged in sex would learn during *Maidstone's* production. That was all part of the process, of course, for a crew that filmed forty-five hours of footage, some of it residing in the land of Plot, some of it residing in the land of Behind-the-Scenes, and some of it occupying territory on the borderland between the two.

We see, for example, footage of Mailer playing Mailer the film director. We also view footage of Mailer playing Kingsley (which was in fact Mailer's own middle name), using an affected accent. Two Normans. But then there is also footage of Kingsley in which Mailer largely drops the accent, blurring the division between the two. As Mailer the director explains during an onscreen discussion with the cast, "You can't say that this is real now, what we're doing, you can't say what we were doing last night [while filming a Kingsley scene] was real."

And so, this commando raid represented for Mailer a "Leviathan of a thesis."⁴ It was "pure cinema," a "prime example of the logic of film."⁵ His strategy of attacking the nature of reality was rooted in what he claimed was a "brand new process" of making movies. He would cling to that view in large measure, later suggesting it was a "conception of film which was more or less his own, and he did not feel the desire to argue about it," even while admitting that precursors abounded, ranging from Cassavetes' *Shadows* (1959) to silent two-reelers that were shot without scripts.⁶

As for important precursors, *Maidstone's* narrative engages in an interesting conversation with *Citizen Kane* (1941), a film that Mailer much admired. Both Charles Foster Kane and Norman T. Kingsley are well-known men, but are simultaneously unknown. They are mysteries. We learn the "salient facts" about Kingsley in the opening minutes of *Maidstone*, though some of them are oxymoronically "unconfirmed facts." We hear rumors, such as the possibility that he might be homosexual, but such rumors are nothing more than loose ends, false leads. Kingsley's opinions on major political debates are also unknown. A Kingsley associate tells the High Officials, "You haven't begun to get to know what he really is," but then has to admit that she doesn't "really know what he is any more than anybody else knows." As a result, journalists attempt to unravel the mystery of Kingsley, just as they do Kane. Still puzzled by Kingsley in one of her final scenes, Jeanne Cardigan asks, "What is he?" confronting a problem none-too-different than the reporters at Xanadu face at the conclusion of *Citizen Kane*.

The marvels of Kane are cinematic, of course, as much or more as they are narrative. Rather than being imperfect eyesores, scratches on certain shots in its News on the March newsreel beg to be believed because they appear old and thus historic and trustworthy. And, in those images that seem to grow in majesty and prescience with every viewing, we see handheld footage of Kane in a wheelchair, "stolen" footage as it were, shot through an opening in a privacy fence. We return then to the issue of the handheld camera, which of course predated the *cinéma vérité* movement, and we must reckon with its importance not just in the acquisition of images on location, but also for its unique aesthetic and thematic potential. The use of handheld cameras, whether as early as *Kane*, a later film like *Shadows*, or Vietnam footage on the nightly TV news of the 1960s and 1970s, the image possesses a particular urgency that at least seems to evoke reality. The unsteadiness of the camera and the resulting shake of the image become pivotal in *Maidstone*. During the Assassination Ball, for example, a failed attempt on Kingsley's life evokes all-too-clearly the chaotic footage of Bobby Kennedy's death, which was still horrifyingly fresh in the minds of *Maidstone's* cast and crew when they shot the film.

Rather than the medium being the message, Mailer's message was to disrupt the medium, to disrupt the complacency of the film audience with what it sees and hears. His Leviathan thesis was a strategy, using tactics that ranged from a pre-existing shooting style and an improvised storyline to the combined use of amateur and professional actors who would appear onscreen as characters



Figure 10.2 Lady Jeanne Campbell in the *Maidstone* (1970) dream chapter. Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

and—in some instances, and to some degree—as themselves. It was every bit a commando raid of a shoot.

Deep in my dungeon

According to Mailer, improvisation during a film shoot, “obviously gave more freedom to the cutter.”⁷ *Maidstone*, despite its brief production schedule, would become what Mailer described as “a work of months [to edit], and then finally of a year (and a second year to follow) of mistakes and losses, blunders and mislaid gems of film strip, but when done, it would be his conception, he would by then have written a movie using strips of film rather than word.”⁸ Mailer’s conception of editing was to control the battlefield and the air space by using the booty he had seized during the commando raid.

The completed film clocked 110 minutes. Mailer broke it into twelve sections, or—to continue his writing metaphor—chapters, each featuring a number and title. With the exception of 12: “Silences of an Afternoon,” the titles are immediately straightforward and obvious within the context of the plot and its dialogue: 1: A Meeting of High Officials, 2: The Director, 3: PAX, C [the acronym of an organization name designed to prevent assassinations, but which might in fact encourage them], 4: Instructions to the Cast, and so forth.

Mailer controls and manipulates the images in each section. Along with all the visual signs of “reality”—from handheld camera to light leaks on the image and the occasional appearance of a microphone in the shot—*Maidstone* features various techniques that show an editor’s intervention, including slow motion, echo effects, and audio played backwards, as well as images of a shoreline intentionally edited upside-down. During 5: Politicking in the Grass, the film offers a few very abrupt edits, an indicator of an editor cutting unwanted words or visuals. It features jump cuts without apparent need in 6: A Commencement of Filming, as well as dissolves connoting the passage of time. It even illustrates a curious control over the optically printed section titles: all of them feature numerals, except for EIGHT: Return of an Old Love, which curiously spells out the number.

And then there is what at first seems to be duplicated footage. In 7: Portents, when the “European Agent” asks if someone should “forcefully” remove Kingsley, the “Worried Fellow” responds that he “couldn’t make that decision.” Mailer then offers another take of the same characters having the same conversation in the same location. But their words have changed ever so slightly, placing pressure on us to consider whether or not this is in fact a repetition or whether it constitutes something else, the second of the two takes representing perhaps an alternate reality or a kind of memory of the first take. In moments like these, the editing choices simultaneously remind us of the improvised raid and Mailer’s subsequent control over the spoils of war.

On a larger scale, Mailer transforms the improvised images and dialogue into various themes, such as a sustained meditation on the connection between sex and death. He tells a story in which a director is making a film about a brothel while an assassination plot against him is apparently underway. Possible assailants cavort with unabashed hedonism in and out of character. The first visual in the film (after a TV broadcast by Jeanne Cardigan) is of an architectural structure that looks like a gallows; later we hear that hangings from it involve orgasms. In what is certainly the most experimental section—9: The Death of a Director, there are orgasmic moans of his mistress Carol Stevens and images of nudity and sex intercut with shots of animal bones and of Kingsley lying on the ground as if he were dead. Elsewhere in the same section, Jeanne Cardigan, with breasts partially exposed, licks the microphone before she smears a baby doll and then herself with what appears to be blood while shouting that she hates “NTK,” Kingsley’s initials.

Despite some critical and audience complaints to the contrary, Mailer offers a largely clear, understandable narrative structure that overtly projects a destination point in Kingsley’s assassination, with characters as early in the film as 2: The Director discussing “whether or not we’re going to allow this man to live.” Such an event is foreshadowed elsewhere as well. While boxing, Kingsley says he “can’t take too many shots to the head”; he later suggests that, “being president is equivalent to being a monkey in a shooting gallery.” More obliquely—and more ominously as a result—Lazarus warns him, “There’s a storm coming.”

Perhaps given his comparison of editing to writing, Mailer would have desired, indeed expected, such narrative and thematic coherence to be shaped in postproduction. After all, during 11: A Course in Orientation, he expresses hope that all of the different footage taken from the commando raid will not prove “incompatible.” And he also defends 10: The Grand Assassination Ball from onscreen criticism voiced by the cast, who were unhappy that no character assassinates Kingsley, a narrative conclusion Mailer had planned, rather than improvised. The film, as he would later write, “kept promising developments of plots which never quite took place, even as we travel through our lives forever anticipating the formation of plots around us which do not quite form.”⁹ It was as if he preferred the sound of the fist punching through the air to it landing on a head that “cannot take too many shots.”

So he had “staged,” as he said, the Grand Assassination Ball with no assassination, crafting a story structure leading to an event that seems not to occur. During the editing process, he chose to begin his film with audio of Carol Stevens proclaiming:

*Deep in my dungeon, I welcome you here.
 Deep in my dungeon, I worship your fear.
 Deep in my dungeon, I dwell
 I do not know if I wish you well.*

Mailer knew that the unexpected can and does occur during commando raids—that a regiment can raid the wrong town, for example. And also that the captor can so easily become the captive.

The words written about *Maidstone* while it remained hidden from view all those many years often focussed on 12: The Silences of an Afternoon. By the time it was captured on film, Mailer had “come to the erroneous conclusion his movie was done”; the shoot had wrapped.¹⁰ Then a small number of cast and crew travelled to Lonetree Hill, where—as Robert Griswold suggests onscreen—“those wonderful birds are.” Rip Torn was in that group, percolating with unease and anger over Mailer’s decision to avoid the violence, to avoid the narrative conclusion the story promised, to avoid the assassination of Norman T. Kingsley.

With cameras still filming, the group disperses, walking around Lonetree Hill as we hear a wordless vocal from the singer of “Deep in my Dungeon.” Rip Torn slowly retrieves a hammer from his satchel and throws off his sunglasses. His face appears strained, then a dissolve transports us to his apparently unexpected attack on “Not Mailer,” but on “Kingsley,” who “must die.” Even if (at first, at least) it is Rey the film character attempting to assassinate Kingsley the film character, it is also (apparently) Mailer the man (no longer the director?) who will struggle with Torn (the actor run amok?). Of course that description is possibly too simplistic, as their roles could have reconstituted themselves repeatedly during the attack, which becomes the most captivating in *Maidstone*.

After announcing that he “must die,” Rey/Torn twice hits Mailer/Kingsley with a hammer over the head. The two struggle until both fall to the ground. Mailer then bites Torn’s ear, drawing blood. Their hands grab at each other’s necks, with Torn gaining an upper hand just as Mailer’s wife and children appear. His wife begins screaming and the children begin to cry.

“I’m taking that scene out of the movie,” Mailer yells at Torn shortly after the fight ends. They continue to talk, trading barbs and insults in between Torn’s attempts to explain that he did what he had to do. Writing about the event later, Mailer admitted, “Torn had . . . been right to make his attack. The hole in the film had called for that. Without it, there was not enough.”¹¹ Onscreen, the attack and struggle lasts roughly two minutes, with another six minutes covering Torn and Mailer’s ensuing, quite heated conversation.

The Torn sequence causes us to reconsider the whole of Mailer’s military campaign, just as he did while editing. The fight gave “him a whole new conception of his movie.” He believed that his commando raid created a “presence” that outlived the conclusion of his original storyline, that outlived what had only seemed to be the end of shooting; it was that presence which triggered Torn’s attack. It was an event that took *Maidstone* closer to the “possible real nature of film.”¹²

Perhaps that was the case. But it is just as possible that including the scene moved Mailer closer to the kind of film-making that he dismisses onscreen in 11: A Course in Orientation. Once he was in postproduction, Mailer crafted a film that featured—on a larger scale—a clear narrative that uses dialogue and visuals in a manner not entirely dissimilar to some Hollywood norms, to—on a smaller scale—standard editing devices like the sound bridge that connects 10: The Grand



Figure 10.3 Hervé Villechaize in *Maidstone* (1970). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

Assassination Ball to 11: A Course in Orientation and the dissolve that transports us from Torn's scheming face to his attack on Mailer.

Complaints from the cast over the lack of an assassination in 11: A Course in Orientation anticipated similar unhappiness in the future film audience. Torn's attack aimed to rectify that perceived problem. The result means that, in its basic form, the structure of *Maidstone's* conclusion can be read as not so different than many Hollywood films in which we, the audience, think the film reaches an apparent climax (10: The Grand Assassination Ball) only to be tricked thanks to a brief delay (11: A Course in Orientation) before the villain returns a final battle (Torn in 12: Silences of an Afternoon). It is possible that the dungeon of Hollywood storytelling has welcomed Mailer, who was trapped into including the very kind of conclusion that he had originally sought to avoid.

Mining for the ineluctable ore

It would be wrong, of course, to focus too much attention on the word "dungeon." It would be wrong because doing so would force *Maidstone* into a place in which it does not belong. Whatever allowances the Rip Torn attack makes for an audience, whatever minor similarities the film shows to Hollywood storytelling, *Maidstone* is not a studio film, or really a commercial film of any kind.

After all, we could just as easily invoke the relationship between 9: The Death of a Director and the experimental film movement of the 1960s and 1970s. But in neither case can *Maidstone* be imprisoned by a word like, say, repetition, or recapitulation. No, Mailer's film is something far more than a set of narrative structures or visual styles chained to the cinematic past.

Though intended to be a commando raid on the nature of reality, *Maidstone* raided a different, though equally fascinating place. It became a very unique raid on the way in which cinema depicts reality. It places a degree of faith in a certain kind of depiction, meaning *cinéma vérité*, but remains skeptical of it all the same. Let us not forget that, in his essay "A Course in Film-making," Mailer refers to the "director" in the third person. He knows that Norman T. Kingsley was a fictional character, but he also knows that Norman Mailer onscreen—the "director"—was also, in varying degrees that may shift from moment to moment, a fictional character. "Behind-the-Scenes," at least as captured on film, is very much a plural location.

And that takes us back once again to Rip Torn's attack. Though *Maidstone* has still not garnered a large audience, the attack scene has become a part of the YouTube world, watched online as a clip, viewed outside of the context of the film. And yet it evokes an array of user comments that would no doubt excite Mailer, providing some verification of his Leviathan thesis. Some viewers believe it is real; some don't. Others argue for it having somewhere in between. As Mailer himself wrote:

Maidstone had been filmed not only as an imaginary event but as a real event, and so was both a fiction and a documentary at once and then became impossible to locate so precisely, for what came nearest to the hard hide of the real? Was it [the attack] Norman Mailer, the self-satisfied director, instructing his cast for the last time, or was it suddenly the real head of Norman T. Kingsley that Torn as suddenly attacked. (Yet his hammer had been held carefully on the flat to reduce the damage.) For if the attack was real, the actor upon whom it was wreaked should not be, and would not be unless the attack became fiercer still, fierce enough to kill him indeed. Then Kingsley would have become undeniably more real than Mailer.¹³

Whatever happened at Lonetree Hill during the attack, *Maidstone* reveals to us only a depiction of it, a cinematic depiction. After all, those eight tense minutes between Mailer/Kingsley and Torn/Rey include six edits. Something is there for us to see, whatever it is and whatever it depicts, but something has been left out as well, removed from our view. The cutting room floor also occupies an important place in the nature of (cinematic) reality.

Mailer was acutely aware of what he had achieved, as well as of its limitations in *Maidstone*. The film is not an end, but a means to an end. He quite rightly predicted that "with the advent of electronic editing from videotapes, the notion of writing one's movie out of the film at one's disposal" was inevitable. Such editing—in the form of computer, nonlinear editing—has indeed changed the ways in which films are compiled, crafted, written. And he hoped that his discovery of a new way to make films would prove influential.

Though its direct influence was largely stifled due to limited screenings in 1971, *Maidstone* was certainly at the vanguard of what became mockumentary film-making in the 1970s and beyond, a less complex and certainly less interesting kind of commando raid than Mailer had staged. Indeed, perhaps *Maidstone*'s most important heir came in the form of Orson Welles' *F for Fake* (1973), in which Welles, not unlike Mailer, also believed that he had created a new kind of film. But in *F for Fake*, Welles searched for and celebrated frauds and the phoneyes, whereas Mailer had pursued something quite different.



Figure 10.4 Carol Stevens in *Maidstone* (1970). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

Mailer concluded his essay “A Course in Film-Making” by suggesting that he was mining for “the ineluctable ore of the authentic.”¹⁴ Adjectives, nouns, and verbs might try to freeze frame a film with words, but Mailer’s goal was a continuous and ongoing project. The re-emergence of *Maidstone* means that we no longer have to depend on a word or even a group of words to replace it, whether Mailer’s or someone else’s. Words can shed light on a film, but only the kind of light that causes the shiny DVD to sparkle like a rainbow. They cannot act the part of a stand-in for the film. Experiencing *Maidstone* flickering on a screen reveals Mailer valiantly, sometimes indescribably, in pursuit of something, whether it is the authentic or merely a cinematic simulacrum of it. *Maidstone* is a commando raid forever searching perhaps for the ineffable, even the impossible, rather than ineluctable, but so much the better. That way, the running time keeps running.

Notes

- 1 Mailer, Norman (1971), “A Course in Film-making,” in *New American Review* #12, Theodore Solotaroff (ed.) New York: Simon & Schuster: 232.
- 2 Mailer, Norman (1971), “A Course in Film-making,” in *New American Review* #12, Theodore Solotaroff (ed.) New York: Simon & Schuster: 201.
- 3 Mailer, Norman (1971), *Maidstone: A Mystery*, New York: Signet: 16.

- 4 Mailer, Norman (1971), "A Course in Film-making," in *New American Review* #12, Theodore Solotaroff (ed.) New York: Simon & Schuster: 202.
- 5 Mailer, Norman (1971), "A Course in Film-making," in *New American Review* #12, Theodore Solotaroff (ed.) New York: Simon & Schuster: 232.
- 6 Mailer, Norman (1971), "A Course in Film-making," in *New American Review* #12, Theodore Solotaroff (ed.) New York: Simon & Schuster: 217.
- 7 Mailer, Norman (1971), "A Course in Film-making," in *New American Review* #12, Theodore Solotaroff (ed.) New York: Simon & Schuster: 231.
- 8 Mailer, Norman (1971), "A Course in Film-making," in *New American Review* #12, Theodore Solotaroff (ed.) New York: Simon & Schuster: 226.
- 9 Mailer, Norman (1971), "A Course in Film-making," in *New American Review* #12, Theodore Solotaroff (ed.) New York: Simon & Schuster: 239.
- 10 Mailer, Norman (1971), "A Course in Film-making," in *New American Review* #12, Theodore Solotaroff (ed.) New York: Simon & Schuster: 201.
- 11 Mailer, Norman (1971), "A Course in Film-making," in *New American Review* #12, Theodore Solotaroff (ed.) New York: Simon & Schuster: 238.
- 12 Mailer, Norman (1971), "A Course in Film-making," in *New American Review* #12, Theodore Solotaroff (ed.) New York: Simon & Schuster: 201.
- 13 Mailer, Norman (1971), "A Course in Film-making," in *New American Review* #12, Theodore Solotaroff (ed.) New York: Simon & Schuster: 239.
- 14 Mailer, Norman (1971), "A Course in Film-making," in *New American Review* #12, Theodore Solotaroff (ed.) New York: Simon & Schuster: 241.

11

MAILER'S MOVIE MAJA AND DARK LADY REVEALED

Lee Roscoe

A review I was writing for a local newspaper

Norman Mailer was a man who matched his talent to his ambition. Because of his enormous success in his 20s with *The Naked and the Dead*, written about the Second World War, the novel of the war, he had access to literary rooms which those who never open the door to the “big time” are denied.

Mailer wanted mythos, to affect and change his time's consciousness—what any truly serious and potentially great artist in any genre wants. He made himself a character in those times, and his writing is often carried to heights of public importance on the exegesis of his ego. At first a Trotskyite and an existentialist, he would burst those categories into the definitions of his Manichean metaphysics. Mailer sought experience in the mode of the Beat Generation and the hipsters which he helped to invent. It was that experience which straddled him over a financial hump, for he was an inveterate womanizer and his many fucks and marriages cost him big time, putting his talent to commercial service after the 1970s.

He sought Dostoevsky's heights secretly, but when I once said I thought he might have achieved that with *An American Dream* or *Armies of the Night*, he barked, “As Artie Shaw said to Ava Gardner, ‘You’re so beautiful; why do we have to talk!’” To me he seemed both Balzac-like and Russian in his gifts, with the same golden rococo gift of language, a similar knack for vast plots with many characters, a detail of insight into the way events go down (not so much an insight into individual humans but the broader aspects of classes and their customs). He was also peculiarly American, an inheritor not so much of Papa Hemingway, but Dos Passos perhaps—trying to define America through his story superimposed onto the stories within his novels and non-fiction. (In the end his novels have less meaning to me as revelatory of a turning point in America, than those let's say of Marge Piercy.)

Again like Balzac in *Lost Illusions* torn between journalism and fiction, he was master of both. It's his journalism, his invention of subjective reportage which stays with me. When he was good (as a writer) he was exquisite and when he was bad he was horrid; the little boy with the curl in the middle of his forehead. A writer (and somehow a harlot, yes) both high and low.



Figure 11.1 Lee Roscoe publicity shot taken by photographer Richard Avedon at his studio in New York City, circa 1970s. Photo courtesy of Lee Roscoe.

Excuses

Since filming for, and sleeping with Mailer when I was a young innocent, my life has changed. We do things when we are in our 20s—especially during the 1960s/70s—we would question as a mother ourselves, now older, wiser. But I did these things out of vanity, my dancer's body, pride. Out of a dare. Mailer dared me, and I took the bait.

When the editor of this volume asked me to open the past up again, I did it as a Mailerian dare because it's not something I remember with anything but ambivalence, but more, embarrassment.

It was in part the sense of being dirtied which compelled me to leave the City, to look for a dispassionate escape from ego, a passionate re-entry into earth-bound meaning. I sought what many of my generation did, personal experience, tribal, natural self-sufficiency, justice and peace to transfigure our global community and the beleaguered planet. Most of us were seekers, not simply self-indulgent hedonists (although pleasure is a revolution, too)—as revisionist right wing history would name us. I don't want my identity to be tied to Mailer's in any way, no Anais Nin to Miller, no God forbid gullible Lewinsky, tragically, to exploitative Clinton. So I can reclaim a little bit of my dignity here by saying: My lives after Mailer were many.

Advertisements for myself

I was a trained Equity actress, working in New York City and later in Massachusetts. I invented Instant Dress, the first modular, multi-use garments, archived at The Fashion Institute of Technology because the designs pioneered structureless clothing. They were distributed over the United States. Then the big guys took the concepts and designs, made money, while I did not. The stuff is now very much a part of the language of fashion design. Trivial, but it would have been a way for me to make money to get off the grid, get out, live simple.

I worked for years as an environmental educator/activist, given grants, helping to save hundreds of acres of land, commended for my work. I wrote a book on the feedback link between nature and the phases of human history before cultural ecology was a household word. I'm a journalist with hundreds of published pieces. Mostly I am a playwright with groundbreaking work which this corporate and corrupt era prevents from production. No that's not sour grapes. Some of my theater has snuck through with readings at The Living Theater, and a few productions of shorter pieces in Provincetown and Boston. Is it vain to say that Howard Zinn, David Hare and Judith Malina have raved about my plays? These include *Poor* in which a man who has played by the rules, has lost everything, his job, his marriage, his home—takes a theater hostage. In *The End of America* in the *Time of the Fireflies*, a woman is arrested in the house of her lover during a “national emergency.” As the nation falls, the family is torn apart.

At the Hollow is about love, what it owes, how it fails as two parallel relationships dissolve during a 4th of July weekend in the Catskills. *The Second Coming* is a catharsis, a cartoon ritual of human psychoses common to all cultures, religion, runaway capitalism, ecocide, and genocide. I shared Mailer's concern for the possibility of a totalitarian America, fearing the patterns of chauvinism, ignorance, sham religiosity, militarism which Sinclair Lewis had written of well before Mailer in *It Can't Happen Here*. Through the years I would adapt that novel for the stage, finally producing in a staged reading to raise money for a peace group. (I'd been an activist since I was a child, joining my mother on the streets of New York in protests against Vietnam.) Some theaters wanted to do *It Can't Happen Here* but the executors of Lewis's estate, would not give me the rights. Mailer was in Provincetown on Cape Cod at the time. I was on Cape in another town.

It would have been nice to have Mailer for a mentor instead of a former exploiter. He might have helped me crack the code. Instead, dividing the world into winners and losers as he was to do (again he was a pioneer of the populists), he would likely have called me a loser. “Take risks,” Mailer often preached. He was always talking about those people who lived in highs or lows, risking all winning and losing all. But when you had lost it, he simply considered you a loser.

The clothed and the live

So then the past:

There is no pride in taking one's clothes off on-screen. It is the rankest kind of narcissism. Or perhaps it is a way to lay claim to the universal vulnerability which is female; championing that vulnerability against the universal will of men to exploit women. Or at least against Mailer's exploitation, if not of all women, of me. Mailer was almost a bad man. He did things which required

forgiveness, and at 20 or 21 —when I first met him (he was 23 years my senior, a year apart from my father at Harvard to whom he bore a certain resemblance)—it was an act of power to forgive as much as an act of innate mercy. I used the film-making with Norman to begin to understand myself. I desired to begin to create some equal polarity between myself and the man, an icon to my cultured and literate family, in many ways my teacher (though he would often ask me to teach him, because my interests devoured many planes from music to genetics, history, language, poetry, politics, physics.) I had no compelling accomplishments at that age obviously, but being beautiful gave me standing. Then women need not accomplish to the same degree and dimension that “great” men had to, to be “great” in their person, body, soul, intellect. Being/doing was female/male in a way that it is not now.

Were I the daughter of myself, then, would I say, go ahead? Make films with, have sex with, strip down for Norman? I would say, experiment for the sake of the search, sure, but keep your skin covered.

Making films with Norman was an expression of the 1960s. So I forgive myself. Looking to live the way I wanted to live, creatively, responsibly, without apology. Had I been less of a “somewhat nice middle class girl,” as Mailer once called me, my exploits with him would have been done with a working class bravado and pride. I am working class now. Then again I had been bucking the system in ways since I was a kid.

At Shady Hill school in Cambridge, living on Sparks St., making bow and arrows, playing badminton with friends, as the top floor resident comic songster Tom Lehrer, practiced piano, I loved to learn. I was tested by Harvard with 3 others of my grade; I broke the barriers; they could not score me especially in language skills. My family moved to Manhattan in the middle of my 8th grade year. My new school Brearley, almost expelled me for questioning the nature of gravity. (I did not believe that equivalency was real, nor that gravity existed in a Newtonian sense, turning out to be in good company with Einstein and physicists who now question even Einstein’s very solid theory of relativity.)

I did not want to take Bible class; I argued *better red than dead* in school debates with *New York Times* heiresses, and more importantly the school did not support me in writing plays. A good friend told me after graduation the headmistress asked her to surveil and report on me. A history teacher may have quit over my treatment at the school. Brearley would not give me a recommend for college.

I met Mailer while I was gophering for Leo Garen while he was casting Mailer’s eminentlyactable play, based on his novel, *The Deer Park*. He was thinner than he later became, just an incipient plumpness; wearing granny glasses under an appealingly ingenuous Jewfro, more scholarly. I asked unceremoniously after being introduced to him, how the words stuck to him and he said they did so less and less as he aged. He hoped what he imagined actually corresponded to what was.

The well-known actress, Kathleen Widdoes saw me in the audience after her audition and generously said, “There’s your Elena.” Auditioning at last as Elena opposite at Eitel by preeminent character actor William Prince he said afterward to Mailer while pointing at me, “That’s the best young actress I’ve seen in years.”

But though I’d been studying acting since I was thirteen with theater greats Michael Kahn, and then Walt Witcover at HB Studio (who thought I would become the next Anna Magnani), though Yale Drama school had read plays I had written at age fourteen or so and told me to take two years of college after Brearley, and come to Yale, Garen said I had not lived the part, so he would not hire me.



Figure 11.2 Lee Roscoe publicity shot taken by photographer Tony Ynocencio at his studio in New York City in 1970. It was commissioned through Ynocencio for Roscoe's "Instant Dress"; a multi-use, seamless fashion creation of her design. Photo courtesy of Lee Roscoe.

I had not gone to Yale. Instead, I worked backstage, continuing to study acting, speech, dance. I'd understudied at the Provincetown Playhouse in the village and then acted in the New Pinter Plays, gotten my Equity card at eighteen. I'd been in a long run of *The Kitchen*—Off Broadway which Jack Gelber directed.

Returning in a beige net top and pale jeans invisible at night to the balcony of the Theater de Lys, I watched auditions, confronting Norman on the way out. "Psychic-kill," he said. "Strindberg," I said.

Later he came to see me, calling me either a hound of hell or a bird of paradise. (The high or the low. Anything but the middle.) He was guilty; he said my creative force reminded him of his own at my age. That to thwart, stifle it could cause me great harm, and in his guilt, he later decided apparently to make amends by casting me as the hooker "Lee Ray Rogers" in his film, *Beyond the Law* (1968).

When *The Deer Park* opened, Mailer knew it would fail, saying so at the after-party at his house, a brawl, and tangle. Marian Javits, wife of the Senator, held forth, chic in her rust brown coiffed hair, printed silk blouse and thin gold bracelets (as I recall perhaps imperfectly). Mailer's dad pinched me; a black activist tried to seduce me; all before the reviews came out. The leading lady was tough, but dull with no charisma, not even much of an actress. The gal who understudied her had read my script on which I had annotated beats, objectives, character breakdown: Marsha Mason—who would go on to marry Neil Simon and have a pretty good career. (She'd be in *Beyond the Law*, too.)

It irked. Mailer said that had I been in *Deer Park*, it would have worked. I think Norman loved me in his way, but he was not a man who could show tenderness, and I could not love him. (If he loved me, later was it revenge that made him exploit me?)

We became lovers, and I sought him as professor of the body and mind. I didn't want to love him; he was force red over my lilac watercolor. I couldn't love a man who had as a second avocation, fornication, seduction of so many women. I wanted to remain jaunty, without commitment. I'd rather read a good book up until I had lost my virginity at nineteen. The double standard annoyed me. My virginity was mishandled by a callous friend of my family who scorned me afterward because he did not believe I was a virgin. He was a producer who would not help me because he said I was too bourgeois, annoyingly keeping my apartment clean. My second and thus first lover was Rip Torn who seduced me when I was part of the ensemble in Arnold Wesker's *The Kitchen*. Rip played the lead, a (what-else?) crazy chef. When I discovered Rip (who had won me by pursuing me relentlessly with quaint Texas sayings like "Don't shake my tree unless you mean to eat the peaches,") making out with a blond school teacher, what was left of my mental virginity was punctured. I was crushed.

Punished for sleeping with a married man. (I never felt that with Norman. All his marriages were open; he kept his harems.) If men could be sexual without care, then so could I. Perhaps I couldn't love. I was wrapped so tightly in my shell. As I would later say in *Maidstone* (1970), I just could not reveal myself, emotionally. And yet Mailer said I was bare skin, open to the winds, no protection; that this, and my acceptance of sexuality as an act of nature, would scare men off.

Mailer had nailed it. The sexuality of women is suspect in the culture of commodity because it is nature, and nature defies culture. While it can be used and reveled in, tipped up and tipped, it is still forbidden fruit, something to be exploited. (Or worse, something to be denied I thought then by surgically-suited white middle-class women's movements. I'm a better feminist now.)



Figure 11.3 Lee Roscoe as Lee Ray Rogers in Norman Mailer's *Beyond the Law* (1968). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

I was used to improvisation from acting class. I thought the film could be *cinéma vérité* as fiction. I had developed a theory of double reality for theater which could apply to film as well, that the moment in art coinciding, intersecting with the moment in reality made its own sacred, Attic, intensity, its own reality. I had not yet seen Cassavetes' films, though I had seen the documentaries about Vietnam which had radicalized me against the war, if not yet then against the entire system of selling your time to buy a life, of corporate artifice, and the judging of human value by wealth alone. Mailer and I talked about the film, about the nature of the film; likely about the film as poetry as an existential moment. He had explained the existential to me as a moment balanced on life/death/danger.

Clasping my Christmas tree to my bosom, I asked him what existentialism meant. (Those aqua fairy bulbs were constructs like those out of my window and would always remind me of the city: the glass and lights, the crushable and tangibly Fragile, frangible.) He said, "What you are doing? There: here is danger in the moment. You could, or the tree could survive it, or not. The moment of danger reveals us to ourselves."

The "double reality" of moment and art also coincided in the political context, important themes of his films. Mailer was prescient and accurate about the monster of totalitarianism and surveillance in an incipient police state.

For *Beyond the Law*, Mailer the Director said he wanted me to be an Assyrian belly dancer, hooker, daughter of a rug maker; arrested for prostitution, thrown into the line-up. His other prompt was that I was to be a part-time whore because I was studying somewhere for my college degree.

I took a bus to and then taxied around the Assyrian area of Brooklyn looking for the past to absorb. It had a mill-town, dreamy, dankness. A close-knit, not-quite poverty. The dim alleyways seemed damped by something woven.

The rest of the character of Lee Ray Rogers was my creation, struggling toward a degree in Biochem/Microbiology at Hunter College, hooking as a way to revenge myself on my poverty. Perhaps the way we played it, he and I, was about power. (Later, ironically, I would teach environmental education, come up with theories on genetic bio-feedback at the micro-level before the field of epigenetics was discovered. In CP Snow and Ruth Benedict fashion, I admired the Dionysian creative and the rational scientific.)

Mailer left me room to improvise. I chose the obvious theme: He was the Cop. I was the Hooker, who was good, who was evil, cop or hooker? The film itself was about that: the metaphysics of good and evil, the parameters of it, as well as a look at the psychology of a cop (before the book *The Thin Blue Line*), how authority could go over the top. He gave me one line, "I whip the old men and the young men whip me," which I thought was ridiculous and said in the film as a spoof on dominatrices, or a "You wish, bud."

The film-making itself took place in the Pennebaker/Leacock studios, and George Plympton played a version of Mayor Lindsay. Rip was in the film. Mailer's wife Beverly, with Buzz Farbar and Mickey Knox—NM's drinking and sparring buddies.

Eddie Bonetti came after me as I waited for my entrance to a scene in a rehearsal room. One of Norman's protégés, Eddie lived in Provincetown, was a squat potato of a working class novelist, largely unpublished, violent with unfulfilled or unrecognized talent. He came out of a Rodin-like pose, saw me and went ape-shit: "I am going to have to kill you," Bonetti yelled. I called for Norman, and he came in as Bonetti was screaming: "You are evil!" Norman quieted Bonetti down. "She's innocent," he said. "Lay off. Remember this is a movie, not real life." He had raged at me as a real whore, scaring me into a double reality I used in my scene's take, which I no longer remember.

I do recall Norman and Lee Ray talking over drinks for a long, long time, maybe an hour or more of footage. Was it that night of the "line-up," or the next night? Would that were retrievable; interesting to know what a raw kid and a powerful wordsmith could say in character. He as the Irish cop with the lilt and the fedora, and the slight weak bend to his posture; not macho in our scenes, more like a brother, a concerned or interested one. Those Jewish-Irish eyes merry with a foxed blue, like bluing on a pistol.

Some of the movie was improvised in the bar across from Theater de Lys, site of *The Deer Park* debacle. They had to put music over a piece of the film, because I had laughed, and my laughter from the bar was too recognizable, drifting in on a scene with Marsha Mason, the Empress of the button-nosed.

I walked in to do my scene at the club table, brazen with my breasts showing in a low cut black polyester knit 1960s dress. Beverly—in character as the cop's wife—threw a drink at me; I rubbed it on me. Mailer abused me verbally—having sprung me from jail—he was the arresting cop having a drink with Satan; Sadie Thompson; the cop, a John Cotton investigating sin. "I have," he rolled out in his fairly convincing Irish brogue, "more children than you've cut out of your dirty little womb." His felt hat (remember those fedoras our daddies wore?) sat foetally woeful on his large head. (Mailer hated adverbs and adjectives, he called them girly writing, so I apologize here for mine. For Mailer, writing should be verbed, assertive, male, active, doing. Too much sex could squander the virility, the intent, of a writer. One had to abstain before writing, like Indian warriors abstaining before readying for battle.)

"I'd like a child someday," I said (hurt). "A small cat. Black." Hipster-novelist Seymour Krim, after seeing the film, said I had been a diva of luxurious vulnerability, fending off Norman's brutality. Vindicated. I tossed back a tequila and lemon with him at one of the primo village hang-outs, Casey's.

And it was that concatenation of sexual tension, jealousies, mixed with political ferment which brewed up in Mailer's films. Though they are some of the worst ever made, that vitality, that wisp of exactly what the 1960s were about, perhaps still thrives in them. Some aura of an America going rotten, idealism thrusting up through the corruption and totalitarianism most of our set feared was inevitable. The martial violence simmering at the March on Washington, Miami and Chicago, oppressions of the underprivileged, widening class and race schisms; Vietnam.

Norman came to me when the film was being cut. He had bad news; he was stooped, brows worried. Much of our footage had been destroyed. It seemed as if acid had been poured on it. Some of our best moments, he thought. We wondered if Lana Jokel, one of the editors had done it. She had been balling Rip, apparently. On the back of his motorcycle around town. He thought it was his duty to have every woman he met.

Around this time the super of my building, originally from an eastern European country, made an excuse to check my apartment's electrical outlets. Mailer told me I was probably bugged now, and that because of him I would be a target.

The film premiered at Lincoln Center. To my horror, my name was neither in the film credits! Nor in the program. I could not get reviewed. This was about as dire as being nixed for the part of Elena. The reviewer at *Newsweek* managed to scrounge up my name and give me a line and a photo (a still of Norman and me). Other than that, nothing.

Mailer was ambivalent, Dire Ambivalence I called him: Mal-Air, the Grey Fox. Norman had at one point almost cut all my lines out of the film. As vitriolic as his improvised attack in make believe was, he seemed as piqued by the fact that I had spoken any retorts. At Pennebaker's studio, in an editing room, empty and clean except for a computer-like machine which ate up and held strips of film, we sat overlooking a fullness of sooty city chaos, Mailer reported to me in sarcastic funk that Norman Podhoretz (before he became a mad neo-con) had liked my lines, had asked the Author if he had written them for me. "No," Mailer had responded and had then decided to cut them all. Pennebaker or was it, Ricky Leacock—both cameramen for Mailer's flicks or my protestations—held him back from dumping all my lines. Pennebaker never liked me, so maybe it was another cameraman—Nick Proferes? Norman decided he would have to make another film, in part to make up for my slighting. "It will be a loss to the cosmos if you aren't a major actress," he said.

And yet he himself may have taken my name off the cast list of *Beyond the Law's* premiere at Lincoln Center because Beverly was pissed at his affair with me, or because he was jealous of Rip, or because as he enigmatically stated at Elaine's: "You'll never work for another film-maker if I have anything to do with it." [When years after I had left New York and he was living on the same turf I was and I went back to acting and received terrific reviews at a theater he had a good deal of money in, he never even came to see me. Not even a phone call.]

It was just rhetoric, his "existential risks." I took risks for him. Acting in his movies cost me work. Not only was my name mysteriously left off crucial cast lists (another independent film as well—no credit for me) so that I could not be reviewed—after working for Mailer, no agents would ever call me back. A spy I knew would tell me that I was indeed a target because of Mailer, and also because of Rip, whom "they" considered to be, ridiculously, a "Stalinist."



Figure 11.4 Lee Roscoe with Michael McClure in an outtake sequence from *Maidstone* (1970). Frame enlargement from 16mm triacetate projection print. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

***Beyond the Law* goes to college**

LBJ would resign while we flew to Notre Dame with *Beyond the Law*. The clouds looked like big pillows and featherbeds. I told Norman that and he replied that I could quite unman a guy.

Boys at Notre Dame had exploded into an uproar in the audience after the screening when I came out on stage, I raised up my hand telling them to burn their draft cards while wearing a see through white lace blouse with a silk camisole under it years before showing your underwear was chic, years before there was a Madonna.

At the after-party at Notre Dame for the screening of *Beyond the Law*, I wore a Jean Patou gown given to me for a chunk of research I had done for someone's poetry book, *The Classic Woman*—published by Playboy Press. The midriff was bare, skirt long and tight, top hooded like a nun's habit, white. ("Sadie Thompson comes to Notre Dame," the paper wrote.)

Talking to Father Jacobs, a real-life hoodlum priest, Mailer passed, drink in hand, growling, "Be careful of her, Father. She's the devil." Three priests turned to him, all delighted with my habit. One of them said, along with Jacobs; "No, no, Norman. You have it wrong. She is the angel."

God bless them.

Both Norman and Rip avoided me during the Notre Dame overnight. Rip hung with Buzz Farbar. When I went to share a beer with them, they asked me to leave. Norman wandered around the campus in a funk, propositioning a gal in the film who would marry JP Donleavy—finally ending up solitary.

And next:

We talked a lot about the next film, *Maidstone*. Norman would play a presidential candidate foretelling the inevitability of a Ronald Reagan: a celebrity, and film-maker who came into politics, who was a power-seeking pimp of the American capitalist brothel. There was an overlay of real but soft-core pornography set in a male brothel in a pool house at Barney Rosset's estate. I would play a half American Indian woman, half Russian. He wasn't sure in what relationship to him I would stand. He knew the piece would be about betrayals, those which political power seekers use to forward their megalomania.

Rip would play a version of Raoul Castro; he was to be a crazed opposition political force to Norman T. Kingsley. Someone would seek to assassinate Kingsley. But as I said: I'd rather read than make love or fight, and it was reading which caused a rift. A betrayal (though unmeant) in a way, itself. Mailer had proudly given me his one book of poems, *Deaths for the Ladies*. I had loaned it to Rip. Norman had seen it on his shelves. Norman then invited my parents to one of his lectures; saying pointedly while looking at them something like this: "You find a lovely virginal creature, only to find she has a stud behind her."

Norman asked me about Rip. I said: "Yes, he was my lover." He punched me in the stomach. I forgave him for the pain I had caused. I was beginning to realize that women hold power over men's egos and this is not something to be misused, trifled with, rather it needed responsible shepherding. But it soured the film which was about to roll in a month.

Rip was frantic, "The whole town knows he's in love with you," he said dramatically. Who knew? I thought. I had convinced Norman to let Rip play the sexualist, Marion Faye, in *Deer Park*. In slick black leather, Rip as Faye was a rhythm and blues kingsnake of sensuality. Mailer and he had had a bitter falling out over women. One in particular who'd been living with Mailer and Adele [Morales] as a possible sexual threesome, and whom Rip had enticed away or at least enticed into a love affair.

Having done it to him before, Rip was doing it again. Like the proverbial scorpion, neither could help themselves; they were what they were. And I admired that honesty in both of them. Rip never bullshitted me about fidelity or love, yet we loved each other as *compadres*, compassionately. He too was a chaser of women, but he was not urban as Mailer was. Rip was a hunter, fisherman, deep east Texas country boy, and easier for me to love, admire; decent in spite of his wandering

lusts. He was political: hanging out with black activists, against the War (more so after my urging). I saw him hassled over and over again, pushed off-stage, a bullet shot through his window. So then off we went to Long Island. Brenda Smiley and I amidst all the blondes; the actress who had made a hit in Bruce Friedman's first play, *Scuba Duba*. Brenda—half Kiowa, half firefly—I admired her experimental nature, good actress, writer for the underground newspaper *Rat*, newly off a bad bout with meth. I admired her for her independence, and she liked me for my lack of it, my softness, my "class." The very middle class-ness Norman hated. "Nice Jewish girl" was a curse for him.

On set, Joy Bang and I decided to get over disliking one another and become friends. (We had sold stick on tattoos together as a gig for some D.J.) Cameras rolling all over the place. Affairs starting, breaking. People acting. Sag Harbor Inn. Our rooms small, camp-like off the balcony and sides of the big main hall. Camp-like wooden picnic dining tables, in the huge hall. Crappy food, but nourishing enough. Who can remember what we ate?

The estate of the Brockman's, big stone, ballrooms each room, or that is how I recall it. A dark wood balcony on which Mailer as Kingsley speechified and yelled at me to, "Get that black Russian head of yours out of the goddamn way!" Hissing with a cat snigger: You are half Norma Shearer, half Maria Plisetskaya. (A game he would play, who is which half of whom.) He was in a blond mood. Wife Beverly was a quintessentially genteel blonde. Working class, southern, she had had an affair with Miles Davis. She was a hip, great looking Brunhilde wearing a chain-mail helmet when she came to the set on the last day or two of the film.

On the first day of the shoot with a hundred people surrounding him, on the lawn in front of the gothic Brockman estate, (some of them I don't know to this day), Norman spoke of film-making as a general with an army; first the plan of attack, then the details of execution. Sunlight and long lawns; hippie clothing, minis, espadrilles, diaphanous dresses, bell bottoms, silk; bathing suits. Brenda wailing broken-hearted that Michael McClure whom she loved, had gone off with the visiting Ultra Violet. Me and Mike under a tree talking about modern poetry and the nature of revolution, and the nature of elusive reality. What is metaphor anyway? Cameras rolling. Me in white. Mike in an Edwardian Fauntleroy outfit, or how I envision him.

Once again someone chasing me in my London-bought white ruffled mini; Jose Torres's manager, again like Bonetti before him, only this time not likely staged by Norman, running after me calling me *putana* and threatening to kill me, until brother Libra, Mike, interceded. Me under a tree waiting for a scene with Norman, eating my favorite Mounds Bar, with gnats in my eyes. Moving out of the camera frame. Norman infuriated, excoriating me, "You've ruined the scene. You shouldn't have moved. You lost an opportunity, a cosmic moment. You killed the moment. You were a Madonna but you ruined it!" His voice small; his face a tight snarl, looking at me as if he had expectorated the last chewing gum anyone ever wanted to unwrap on the planet.

Going instead to film with torch singer, Valerie Bruneau, played by Carol Stevens whom he would impregnate and later marry. Carol cursing me, retiring to her room to listen to her lover Gary McFarland's records, or at least drink booze and seduce Rip. Carol's witchery. An older version of you, Mailer would say. I never saw it, save that we were both Jewish, both brunette. My crying and crying and crying, with Leo Garen saying: "you'll never make another film."

James Toback picking my brain about the plot and technique of the film, then saying he would feature me in the *Esquire* piece if I fucked him; my definitively saying: not on your life. Later that night at the Ossario estate (owned by a man who must have picked his last name to fit the bones, for the name sounded like ossuary), where shell art in the hundreds, bones, hooves and skulls, collages and velvet ribbons, and the sense of a primal lair transferred to an artist's huge manor house, me a mess, out of white, in an orange and pink print floral strapless and Norman breaking



Figure 11.5 Lee Roscoe in close-up in the revised version of *Beyond the Law* (1968), *Beyond the Law-Blue* (1970). Frame enlargement from 35mm triacetate projection print. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

Lane Smith's jaw in a fight. Lane was living with Rip's ex-wife, actress Annie Wedgeworth, who had the cutest tusch in the business. Annie was sweet as her eyes were blue. A Texan like Rip. The tipping point between party, film, acting, playing and reality passed through. Fright descending on us. Rip saying, "Mailer saw us making out in the swimming pool the other night" — because Leacock filmed it; cold. Scared that Kingsley/Norman would react badly again. "Why is he being cruel, why are you?" I whimpered. "Pack of dogs on the weakest, it's nature," he said, walking away. And now rumors through my friend Ron Hobbs, of a *coup*. Hobbs was Amira Baraka's agent. (Baraka's "revolutionary theater" was a seminal influence on me. No "White Negro," he.) Hobbs: Watutsi-roots, Harvard educated, dancing in the inn at Sag Harbor telling me I move like his sister, asking a profound question: suppose someone were to come to power who was everything the country needed, could we trust him? Plotting with Rip/Raoul to take down Kingsley. Plots were produced by the various factions including an assassination attempt on Norman Kingsley's life by a right-wing black, masquerading as a liberal played by Ron. He told me over milk and cookies in the big lunch room of the inn, broad light streaming out to the harbor, that someday the right would front a black to con all the liberals, and that he would be the real dictator we all feared. I can't believe it to this day, his hyperbolic prophecy.

Norman/Kingsley began to think that Rip/Raoul did in reality want to kill him; that Rip/Raoul as a Cuban style Marxist, truly wanted to rid the world of the plastic tyrannical obscene fascist which Kingsley represented. Purification. *Maidstone* through its how many days and nights of filming?

remained a Fellini-esque dream. Women were wearing satin and gauze evening gowns and lounging pajamas in broad daylight. The piano-playing midget of a later *Fantasy Island*, fell into the swimming pool, stoned, and had to be rescued. Rosset found him just in time.

Famous literary folks drifted in and out. Black Panthers staged a scene. Brenda was a part of it. Norman would give actors, or sub-directors with actors, groups of improvisations to do. There were scenes being filmed by moving, mostly hand-held, sixteen millimeter cameras—in houses, on grounds, by pools, by the sea. Some people would come up with a scene and collect a cameraman. A communal film. A commune of impending psychosis. Split with Norm's predilection for the Dual, between two poles or dream and reality. Probably a lot of marijuana being smoked, but oddly I never saw or smelled it. They were on the porch of Ossario's mansion or was it the manse of some big art maven, the very famous and rich De La Who? Blond, aristocratic, like my friends at Brearley. (When they admired me, aloud, Mailer told them I was a narcissist like himself; that with my body, I could probably have an orgasm just looking at myself in the mirror.) At this point the revolution as a sexual event began to lose its glamor for me. Dancing to the moon, soft summer light, rich scents of sea and perfume, dancing in the bar, chicken scratch Texas style Rip; silence and loud music.

Paradise island

We filmed the last scenes for *Maidstone* on Gardiner's Island. Gardiner's Island was Eden: twisting bushes, old growth forest dating back to the colonial era and beyond, deer-gold woods, dunes shaped by gods, terns, everything painted in an unearthly wash—the primal pearlescent and shadowed orchards where the Apple grew. The sea haunting beyond. The pure earth and its first cause, basic needs, the earth which would eventually subsume me with its call.

I had been floating around in a pastel paisley wrap dress, long, of cotton voile. Bobby "Lion" Gardiner had shown me the inside of his ancient family homestead, a modest colonial farmhouse. There was a painting of his wavy, red-haired, dead-pale skinned Morgana Le Fey of a wife. He stopped Norman and I on our way down to the field below to say delicately with his hand on my shoulder, "This is the royalty, Norman. A princess. Film her." Norman had stiffed him.

Lion Gardner's own royal escutcheon flew above his roof ridge. The family had been given the place by King Charles the 1st as a fief in the seventeenth century for services rendered in the wars against the Pequots, a period of history I would later become obsessed with. The island still was not a part of America, but its own land under royal charter. A perfect place from which to stage a revolution.

I explored a piece of the island with Brenda. All of a sudden I had a psychic whiff of a big intuition of trouble and I told her we needed to scam downhill. As Brenda and I ran downhill Rip was running up, bleeding. He snapped at me, "What did you expect?"

Mailer had clamped down on my second lover's ear as they wrestled on the ground. Beverly was screaming her concern for her three children watching. I would see the footage later. The camera had buzzed on and nobody had parted them. It was difficult to tell who was screaming what. (The shit she put up with, distending her into a being he wanted, not really looking at her for what she was, flaunting me in front of her, like a dupe; and then he practically cut her out of his bounteous alimonies or so he told me he was going to do. I wonder she didn't stab him as Adele had. We made our peace later on the Cape. I wanted her forgiveness.)

Rip told me we had to leave the island. That Norman had threatened to kill him and this was not filmic but real life. We borrowed Bobby's launch. After an escape through fog by boat back to the Sag Harbor Inn, we slept fitfully for a brief while and then I took my old lover home to the City, before NM could find us at the hotel. McClure and Ultra Violet found their way to my house. Was she wearing a violet velvet pants suit? Surely her eyes were Liz Taylor violet, and her mouth piquant and French as was her accent. Wanting to make a party of it until Raoul/Rip told them it was serious business, that he was really hurting. I phoned my ear doctor, Dr. Stanley Blaugrund, and he immediately booked Rip into Mt. Sinai where they pumped antibiotics into him so the infection would not travel to his brain, and the ear would not cauliflower. Dr. Blaugrund told me the ear had been saved just in the nick of time.

Loyal to Jack Gelber who had been one of the first directors to use Rip after he had a long hiatus of no work, having been black-listed in Hollywood either for politics or fornication or both, Rip walked away from *Easy Rider* (1969), to appear in Gelber's *The Cuban Thing*. Jack Nicholson likely would not be a star today if Rip hadn't left.

Maidstone could have been an interesting film. The scenes with the blondes from miniature Joy Bang quintessential hippie, blonde bangs the puppy blonde, who'd been Hendrix's mistress for a time, to larger statuesque versions, French and tanned Mitsou was it? And other blondes, Kingsley's Rat Pack; the real black radicals screaming for revolution; Raoul's mad-eyed performance; Ron Hobb's assassination attempt; the colorful names of the times, Barney Rosset, Herve the midget, Brenda the actress, Michael McClure the San Francisco poet stoned on acid, Lady Jean Campbell, former wife, wife Beverly, multiple mistresses, Sherie the stewardess who filmed like Ava Gardner on camera and who was so plain in real life, Mailer said that she gave the world's best blow jobs. Gorgeous-legged red-headed Mara Lynn, her legs lathed as good as Juliet Prowse's; all of it might have made an abstract, art nouveau quintessentially 1960s document. But he ruined it on the cutting room, seeking for a story, a through line which was not there. Adding in Jean Campbell with her Julia Child look and voice. The worst movie ever made. With *Beyond the Law-Blue* upcoming being the second worst.

Mailer did not forgive me for siding with Rip in the great escape across the sound in Bobby "Lion" Gardiner's small motor boat, through fog, between the driftwood gnarled stunted trees, over ungauged waters we were not familiar with at twilight. Like the first *Beyond the Law*, where I disappeared out of hours of footage by acid spilt on the film, and under some of Mailer's deliberate slicing, again Norman would edit me out of *Maidstone* by intention.

I wrote to him explaining that my affection was different for both men; that I couldn't have possibly deserted a man in pain; asked him to have some understanding of a difficult situation. I never thought that two men playing out their egos would do so through me. I knew that I was not the only cause for the fight. I think, Norman had thought Beverly and Rip were sleeping together, too. That and his rage at his women had lit the spore which flashed the camera of his violence. Through the smoke of Eden, the city goliaths clashed. Walked, the rectangles and their Cyclopean electric eyes, into the tangle of the bushes. Across the water, ineluctably onto land. I was just the most recent triangulation of their lusts.

Blue movie

The director never responded. Although he took up with me again. I figured he was over his rage and he knew that if he ever punched me again, I would be done with him. A few years later he had his revenge on me in the guise of a quest; making *Beyond the Law-Blue* with me (and then

neglecting to invite me to its premier at Rizzoli's book store screening room, even as he invited everyone he ever knew to his fiftieth birthday, except for me. He claimed it was because Carol his cat woman would have killed me. Too many women there hated me. He didn't want a scene coming from any them my way). Not only had I taken the risk of working for a political target, someone the right branded a subversive in those days, but I now risked being branded by good men as a bad woman for the eroticism in that film.

I had already done a soft-core film when I was broke and couldn't get any work. A set up: a producer offered me a part. I took it because two girlfriends of mine were going to be in it, Joy—and a tall, slim jazzy, Sioux-boned black girl name of Greer St. John who later married a *New York Times* photographer, and who I would occasionally fantasize I was. She reminded me of a cognac kid leather garment, a piece of gold sax.

In the middle of filming I was told to play a nude scene. Too late to back out then. I was intimidated. I made the best of it; and assuaged my hurt dignity by telling myself that since Hollywood and its cousins were a brothel, or so Rip had screamed throughout the making of *Maidstone*, burning dollar bills up to underscore his rage, that I could be honest by acting the part without fear for Mailer, make a comment on the market, playing my whoredom against the hypocrisy of the whores who stay dressed. Let's undress ourselves if it is beautiful. Let's be honest about



Figure 11.6 Lt. Pope smokes marijuana with Lee Ray in *Beyond the Law-Blue* (1970). Frame enlargement from 35mm triacetate projection print. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

being whores. And if I am being used, my particular substance will shine through—I had complained while improvising a scene with Rip during *Maidstone*—that I could, as I said, never quite unzip my emotions but I had never unzipped my clothes.

After having been accused by gossip of sleeping with Rip on camera, to Norman, and by more gossip of balling Norman on camera to Rip, both untrue, and partly what brought on Rip's snit toward me as well as Norman's ear-biting rage—I figured what the heck, why not unzip here in this new film, be hung for a goat as a kid (a sheep as a lamb)? Reveal skin if not heart and soul. I took the dare.

(And now I was really wanting to get out of that marketplace completely, to make enough money to spring myself into a piece of land and never come back to the city.)

Devils and gods

"You're not old enough to understand what it is to call someone a devil." Directing me in *Beyond the Law-Blue*. The film lights in my apartment reamed out any shadows. The red sofa, the red wall in the studio bedroom, the red velvet dividing curtain, the masses of books, the white Formica writing table, the glass coffee table. I walked to the door stark naked to talk to a friend of mine who lived downstairs. I was without guile. Or so I thought. I was too young to understand that men could be devils, when he asked me to incant: "you're the devil, you're the devil, you're the devil" over and over again. "The devil can't say his own name, so maybe *you* are the devil," Norman pointed out.

I was too young to know the kinds of betrayal which defined evil: far too young to be Lucifer myself, I reasoned. I didn't know then, as he did, how men want to murder women for relying on them—when they fail in giving that support. And how women envy (did then, not now) men's strength and freedom. He killed me in *Beyond the Law-Blue*—a cop gone mad with jealousy over sexual betrayal. And his own guilt over sexuality. A precursor perhaps to *Klute* (1971). A hint of the sexual repression and maladjustment which is a root of totalitarianism. (The ultimate control. *Death for the Ladies*.)

After the fall

My father had left my mother high and dry, for (as we later discovered) Thailand. He never spoke to me again nor left me anything. I had had a series of strange events another time to tell, not here. Plagiarism of a book, stolen galleys, opportunities disappearing. Life-threatening events which essentially ended a relationship I had with a former male school mate with whom I was living who was a scion of a very first family.

Here on the Cape, I needed some help to get back on my feet, get published, or a job or both. Or for the Great Man to pay me what he had promised for the films. "Your eyes are still green diamonds," Norman said, when I saw him the last time in Provincetown. He was in the very Miami beach kind of marriage he detested: The house was his and Norris's concern that day: workmen overpaid, doing this and that; yes dear no dear; like a harlot who had become a nun, Norman who had shunned the glib niceties of marriage had become so married. "Yes dear," you handle it. "I have to pay for this, I can't take the time to help you," he said to me. "I owe so much to this house,

to my wives; the novel's not even near finished. They paid me a million dollar advance. I pay my wives all that alimony, child support . . . I have to come through." We were walking at the backside of the house, on the bay side of Provincetown; the clammy fish boat scents, the clanging familiar to me on the Cape; the heat had turned me a toasty color. "You still are an Indian," he said. I looked at his brick Capo's abode and wished to God I had the contents of that Indianness. Wish I had been born to a tribe I could return to. "I can't even get Eddie Bonetti published," he said. "It's just a volume of poetry, not a novel," I said. "I don't know anything about poetry," he demurred. (After all these years—his vengeance for *Deaths for the Ladies*. Even though Mailer had trotted out my knowledge to Paul Carroll, former editor of *Poetry* magazine over dinner at an Italian joint in the east 50s where the head waiter called me angelica. "What's a trope?" he asked. I defined it.)

"I don't have an extra cent. There's a mall opening up in Orleans. You could work there," he added. "Suppose I take the old films on the road: What it was like to make movies for Mailer in the radical sixties and seventies." His eyes went dead.

"I wrote you in Plymouth," he said, cheerily at table. I had never received the note. Nor had he received a letter I had finally sent him. One of his daughters, the one by Carol, was glaring at me. "*Blaue augen*," I said to her. She asked her father what it meant. Norman's eyes were still canny and grey-blue. His hair was almost white now, but somehow he looked the same; a bit bulky, bolsterish as usual, but springy, curlicued; only next to Norris much shorter than I remembered him though. Norris and I were about the same height. (Her heels made her taller than I at the moment, standing athletic and brown in my candy striped swimsuit with a beach cover-up. She could tower over him, dominate him in those heels.)

I liked Norris in spite of her huge gold cross and her platitudes, "Pull yourself up by your own bootstraps." Mailer had changed her name. He'd changed her raspberry sherbet Jennifer Flowers coif from the time I had first met her, to a soft straight hawk-tail russet. She was pale and striking. I asked her if she had ever been in love. "I keep myself protected," she answered. Her almost *Mad Magazine* lurid paintings of celebs adorned the ecru walls.

I started to exchange phone numbers with Norris. Norman gave her the high sign not to, and she did not give me the number. And yet I with my last dollars sent them flowers. A wise man once told me that we treat what makes us guilty very badly. As men so treat the object of desire with which they cannot ultimately come to terms.

In the capitalized heat of the alignment of eight sweltering, psychedelic planets I walked the high ridge of dunes between Wellfleet and Truro; lifted as high as the querying gulls. It was hot even with a hat, the glare was unpleasant as if the sun sought to look into my bones like an x-ray taken through my eyes. The protective membrane of the sky seemed torn off. It created a madness in the body's collective memory. The sun slapped instead of stroked. This heat is something we did to the body of the planet.

Because of the action of chemicals on the membrane of the sky. Now "Beware of Dog," "NO Trespassing;" and "Beware of Sky." Heaven's way is certainly barred when we make hell with it. I had a mild heat stroke, and came home. I don't remember to which of the many recent abodes, wrote the worst poem I have ever written and sent it to Norman to irritate him. After the flowers. I remembered during *Maidstone* dancing alone at night: The moon tides pulled on the marsh (I could smell it, the sea and the flats), the moon pulled on my blood. I danced in the summer night, alone. Wanting not to be superseded by men, but to have my own arts and power, with men subservient to me? Not really. Or no need of them at all, anyway. Rather be solitary in nature like deer in a grazing herd, than to have the night and grasses disturbed by greed, violence, ambition. Harmonious. In symbiosis with the universe, eternal; spirit, listening to the

night trumpet, the jazz of the world. The sea rushes on, both asleep and alive. To sleep and to move, rise.

Other bits, a kind of epilogue

"For her guts in *Beyond the Law-Blue*," the author inscribed into *Of a Fire on the Moon*. Just as he had written, "A hint of the blood of midnight in the love of a tragedienne," on the title page of *Armies of the Night*.

I sold them (with the script he wrote for me for *Blue* sporting his pictograph of an open cunt) to a book dealer for money to survive on and to go out to Montana and the Dakotas and Wyoming, years wanting to, finally going; a few years past the anniversary of Wounded Knee, the essence of our national heritage at its worst. (Heeding the call of a pastel blue spirit of a brown Swainson's hawk, a turkey vulture, a stone with a buffalo on it.) Out there: a vision of tipis where there were none, of the coming of Wounded Knee, the massacre in which we all participated. Alone by car; with my tent and sleeping bag. So far away from the impurity of the past, so cleansed by the rite . . . with sacred things I will not speak of now.

Norman had always urged me to fight back. Gelber had named me Miss Mild. By the trip west, I had learned anger. I knew that anger could be converted into purpose.

After

After I worked in *Beyond the Law* One and Two, and *Maidstone*, the distant phantom haunting all actors was approaching me. I could not get any work, just at the time I had expected some of this notoriety (whether the movies were lousy or not, they were still part of the pop culture) to open a few doors of possibility. I turned Warhol down for a part at the Factory. I missed a meeting with Dick Cavett whom I had hung out with occasionally, and Woody Allen who I met with Cavett, while riding my three speed bike on 5th Ave. wearing knee high black patent leather St. Laurent boots and a mini skirt. I offered to give them rides in my basket. I was lax about ambition. I made mistakes. But I also had many a door closed nicely thank you, shut.

Armies

I gave him a poem about Vietnam, the far right militarists at a St. Patrick Day march. "This poem has apocalyptic vision. It and your description of the train-ride, the march, has given me a load of input. Do you think I should name it *On The Steps of War*, or *Armies of the Night*?" "Armies." Yet he would not help me place the poem. If I started to talk about writing he said, "Get off my pillow." Write millions of words. Write small pieces or very large ones, he offered over a steak at Frankie and Johnnie's when I had dyed my hair Irish setter (well before Norris); sawdust newly splashed over the floors, or was that the Palm?

"I like Brautigan's poetry," I told Norman, "it's better than his novels." Next month Norman was talking about Brautigan's poetry at parties, at Elaine's, and press interviews. I had known him through publication of *Armies*, *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, *Why Are We in Vietnam?* (we



Figure 11.7 Lee Roscoe in *Beyond the Law-Blue* (1970). Frame enlargement from 35mm triacetate projection print. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

spoke of his trip to Alaska for background: “If you ever want to commit suicide, go to Alaska first; see the Aurora Borealis,” he said); *The Fight* (we talked about his trip to Zaire), *The Prisoner of Sex* (I had accompanied him to the notorious Town Hall debate with Germaine Greer, and teased her about her feminine hair twirling; the issue of biology versus nurture/learned cultural roles seemed speciously bifurcated to me). I’d known him up until and through *The Executioner’s Song*, *Marilyn* (a sell-out) and his early thoughts about *Ancient Evenings* (unreadable), and *Harlot’s Ghost*. Each book had its own chapter in our relationship; its own discussions, as did my changes from actor to designer, through the featuring of my designs in *Life* magazine the same issue in which the Munich tragedy was front page; through my company, the publication of Grosset and Dunlap’s screwed up publication (the galleys were stolen before press; the book was pulled while it was still selling well) of a how-to book on my designs, co-authorship of a year-long syndicated radio show about the American Revolution. I knew him from Beverly through and Carol Stevens to the discovery of Norris, through three major long-term relationships of my own. From twenty or so to thirty-two until I left New York to live with E.M. on the Cape—and he could not find me.

We’d eat at so many restaurants he haunted; tucked into nooks like the fairytale crannies of the Chinese Middle Kingdom. He’d suggest with a charming, almost effete delicacy, this veal or those escargots. He aspired to elegance; he asked me about it. We talked politics; he kept me out of the *Spy* magazine bru-ha-ha, though weird things came down my way anyway. We’d go to

parties; we'd make love, once or twice in strange places, once in a flop house, once there was a hilariously distressing attempt under a brownstone's steps (which I stopped)—as if he wanted to live out other selves.

He stopped seeing me when he was working or would take up with a new woman, or wife, for a time. He'd ask for a scene with me. I always turned him down. He said I was always the goat for the other women. One tried to deck me. Beverly, driving by me one evening screamed, "Cunt! My husband can't keep his hands off his mistress," from a Cadillac. I didn't blame her. And: I didn't care. Then Mailer's dear, hip, glamorous, long time, cohort, Mara Lynn one night at Elaine's commanded me to "Marry him. You bring him peace." (Not on your life, I thought. Peter Manso told me years later, Mailer has asked him to keep me out of his biography. Another biography put in so much insulting misinformation about the films, it would have been libelous had they mentioned me by name.)

The day Mailer died I caught a pin salmon in Nickerson State Park and wrote a piece about it: "My Salmon: or Pulling Up the Moon." Someone needed to debunk his myth of macho—tell him it was as middle class as any self-delusion. Creating an alternate in words but living an entirely other act of life.

The schizophrenia so often described by him, between his obsession with God and Devil, with impregnation of women as a sign of true love, lived by him hanging between marijuana and booze, between the dark of hunting sex and the daylight inside the brick walls of the Village, in back of the rooming houses and behind the Sheraton sofas of penthouses, urging him to the discovery of something more compassionate for an American life, had given way—to a mere whimpering compromise. I loved *Barbary Shore*. No one had noticed it. He had liked it too. He said, "What were they expecting, another *Naked and the Dead*?"

If he wrote the greatest American novel in the future, did it mean anything? Could the acts of art be so divorced from those of life? Could a private goodness toward family (if that were in fact, the case), a woman who supported you in your self-delusions and who played your way, be enough (in his terms) to let God increase your karma for the next life? Or were you, as a purported discoverer of the different, responsible to your own power; by that responsibility mandated to clarify, to meld act with thought? I wondered: Who did we take care of? How? Where were we responsible? (I suppose we all excuse ourselves for our mistakes in youth, as long they have caused none harm—and those we learn from; we excuse ourselves because our lives, are, well, ours—and as such, in a finite moment in the universe, they are yes—precious.)

12

OVEREXPOSED: MY FIRST TASTE OF FILM-MAKING

Michael Mailer

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My Father, Norman Mailer, once wrote that film exists somewhere between memory and dream. We recall a film—a good film—the way we recall our memories: fragments crystallized in our minds as visuals of a dream (or a nightmare)—points of light dredged up from our subconscious.

I experienced my first taste of film-making when I was 5-years-old. I was unwittingly a glorified extra—a-day player in the parlance of the biz—and had my debut as a witness to the near death of my father at the murderous hands of Rip Torn. The film was *Maidstone* (1970), the third and final attempt at underground film-making—*cinéma vérité* style—that my dad attempted in the late 1960s.

The cast was comprised of friends, ex-wives, sports and movie stars, and of course a few gangsters thrown in for good measure portraying some warped and far out version of themselves—persona extensions on steroids if you will. They were summoned to Gardiners Island—a bucolic piece of land somewhere off the coast of the Hamptons—to vow their allegiance or disaffection of a certain Norman T. Kingsley (portrayed by who else), who happened to be a retired porn director running for President of the United States. Why not, after all? Qualifications for higher office being what they are you might argue that it was a prescient conceit. Those who arrived immediately drew tags from a hat identifying whether they became friend or foe to the candidacy. Though technically neither side knew the other's position, over three strenuous days the cast would exercise their voices, feelings, prerogatives and, in one case, an assassin's impulse.

And like those stories you hear of people being invited to spend a weekend in jail, some as jail birds, others as the jailers, who take to their role with psychotic zeal so too did the denizens on Gardiner's act out their respective parts with manic intensity. I can't help but look at *Maidstone*—when I can look at it all objectively—as a testament to why the 1960s ultimately imploded. The movie embodies indulgence to the point of mental hazard. And yet the film stands the test of time as a sociological statement.

Cutting to yours truly, for some reason in the midst of preparation for the film, one or both parents decided it was a good idea to bring the family along. Let the kids enjoy the great outdoors while the elders make a movie or some such thought must have filtered through their minds. So into the vortex trotted my older sisters, Danielle, Elizabeth, Kate, my younger brother, Stephen, and

myself. We soon found ourselves unwittingly part of the cast, filmed as cherubs wandering through the fields of the island. But that's where the idyll ended.

As the movie was winding down, Rip Torn, who putatively was playing Norman T. Kingsley's ungrateful brother, Raoul, realized that the only way he was going to save the film was by killing Norman T.K. or, more poignantly, Norman Mailer on camera. To that end in the final hours of shooting, Rip attacked Norman with a hammer to the head. Thank God, dad had a hard head which may have saved him some brain damage but not a healthy pouring of blood—head wounds do bleed like crazy—all of which commingled with Rip's bloody ear as Norman retaliated by gnawing on his ear lobe.

And there we were: Mother and children as eyewitnesses to the bloody carnage. My mother, exercising full lung-power, started screaming at the camera men to do something. However, the esteemed Pennebaker and Leacock realized they had something better to do. Keep filming. Why waste cinematic gold when they had it at their fingertips? Rip, after all, was right. It was the ending the movie desperately needed. Nonetheless, bearing witness as a child was hard on the system and to see yourself many years later on film watching the assault brings back a host of mixed feelings (the clip is available on YouTube—for better or for worse).

Just before my father died we discussed the impact *Maidstone* must have had on my young psyche and we laughed at the discovery that it was clearly the reason why I went into the film business. It was my first traumatic experience and of course the best way of dealing with trauma is by journeying into the heart of it—confronting it head on—so to speak. Ergo, my career choice.



Figure 12.1 Norman Mailer and Rip Torn in the infamous *Maidstone* (1970) hammer finale. Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

As a postscript, my dad and Rip repaired their friendship; Art, after all, is thicker than blood. And while my dad had a few stitches in the head, Rip ended up in the hospital with an infected ear. When Norman visited Rip's bedside he told Norman that a human bite was far more infectious than that of a dog. To which my dad replied, "I should have bitten the whole thing off then."

I also became friends with Rip—perhaps as part of my trauma therapy—and ended up casting him as a co-lead in a film I produced called *The Golden Boys* (2008). During the shoot, Rip would regale me, along with the cast and crew, of *Maidstone*-related tales, one of which was a funny story about him suing Dennis Hopper for libel. Hopper claimed that Rip attacked him with a knife on the set of *Easy Rider* (1969) after being told he was going to be replaced by Jack Nicholson. Rip won the case on the irrefutable claim that he could not have possibly knifed Hopper as he was, at the time, on the set of *Maidstone* trying to kill Norman Mailer.

13

NORMAN MAILER: INTERVIEW (1970)

Joseph Gelmis

*From The Film Director as Superstar by Joseph Gelmis (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 43–63.
Reprinted by permission of Joseph Gelmis.*

“Making a film is a cross between a circus, a military campaign, a nightmare, an orgy, and a high . . .”

Movies were the logical extension of the irrepressible personality of Norman Mailer. How else could he be a Mafia chieftain (*Wild 90*, 1968), an Irish homicide squad detective lieutenant (*Beyond the Law*, 1968), or a serious candidate for the Presidency (*Maidstone*, 1970), except by bankrolling, directing, and starring in his own movies?

The most garrulous, stimulating gadfly of his generation, Mailer became a film-maker at forty-five with the release of his first film on the twentieth anniversary of the publication of his first novel, *The Naked and the Dead*. The film critics mugged him on the way to the box office.

He suggests that the flaw in *Wild 90* was that the sound was bad—which does pose problems for a film that is nothing but three men playing thugs sitting and talking in one room for 90 minutes. He spent six months editing his next film, *Beyond the Law*, with a young film-maker named Jan Welt. The film, a kind of staged documentary about a night in a police station, was shot for four nights and was cut from 11 hours of footage to 110 minutes. It impressed a number of critics with its wit and vigor, but it didn’t make any money.

Mailer’s third film, *Maidstone*, was shot in the summer of 1968 and he was still editing it when we talked in early 1969. It was shot in five working days in the Hamptons on Long Island, with as many as five and six cameras filming at once. In it, Mailer plays a film director running for President during a campaign in which all of the leading political figures have been assassinated and most of the fifty contenders remaining are from show business.

Shooting without a script and from the vortex of the activity, Mailer’s unorthodox approach polarizes critics into those who love him and those who hate him. His casts are chosen from among his friends who reflect facets of his persona. His film-making could be described by the title of his 1959 collection of short works: *Advertisements for Myself*.

Born January 1923 in Long Branch, New Jersey, Mailer grew up in Brooklyn. He has a house in Brooklyn Heights overlooking Wall Street across the river (“So I can keep my eye on the enemy”). He lives with his wife, Beverly Bentley, an actress, and their two sons. He has four daughters by three previous marriages. When he isn’t performing the Public Mailer role, he is a generous, gracious, warm human being.

Between the first novel and first movie, Mailer has lived a Faustian public life as novelist, pamphleteer, mayoral candidate, para-journalist and participant in events he was covering (Gore Vidal says Mailer “intervenes in history”), and neo-Hemingway tough guy who patronizes boxing and bullfighting and bars.

Gelmis: Why, on the twentieth anniversary of your becoming a published novelist, did you embark on a film-making career?

Mailer: I didn't. I got into it bit by bit. I got into it, I think, the way some of those old Jewish businessmen became moguls of studios. Which is, they owned a little theater somewhere that they had taken over because they tried to put their nephew in business and the nephew had turned out to be a no-good and a bum. So to keep from losing a few thousand bucks, they had to take over the movie theater.

And when they took over the theater, they began to see what people liked. And lo and behold, before they knew it, they owned twenty movie theaters, because they were very good businessmen. The next thing was they realized it was all wrong for what they needed. So when they owned enough theaters to command money and influence, they started making movies in New York to supply product for their theaters. Then they moved to Hollywood for the sunshine. And they ended up being tycoons and geniuses.

But they didn't start out with the idea of being tycoons or even being in the movies. They started out with the idea that they were going to give their nephew a job, they were going to buy a little business for him. And at the other end, they changed history of the western world. I'm not saying that's going to happen to me at all. It's a useful metaphor, though. What I'm saying is that I got into the movies just as inadvertently.

What happened, in brief, was that *The Deer Park* was running as a play and my wife (Beverly Bentley) was in it. And, like any stagedoor Johnny, I picked her up every night after the show. Actors, of course, are all wound up. So about six or eight of us would sit around and drink every night. I got very bored with that. You know, it's very boring to discuss your own play with actors every night for three months. Because actors, particularly stage actors, are extraordinarily literal people.

It's very important to them whether the salt shaker is here or there. After all, a stage actor is a man or woman who is, if you will, the president of an emotional factory which has to produce the same product at the same minute every night. And so they attach all sorts of conditioned reflexes in the gearing of their emotions to the placement of objects.

They may pretend that they want motivation, a reason to pick up a salt shaker. But the fact of the matter is that the only way you can produce a certain emotion a certain hour every night and do it without killing yourself is to set up a whole series of conditioned reflexes. Therefore, just as the dog salivates when he hears the bell ring, so the actor begins to weep as he reaches for the salt shaker.

But the thing is, a guy or woman who works that way and lives that way is not the most interesting person to talk to at night about their work. They're just very concerned with the salt shaker. You know, what happened was that the salt shaker wasn't in place. The prop man left the salt shaker *over there*. And they're having a hemorrhage. So you get into these problems night after night after night. And what you end up doing finally is saying: “Sorry, I'll look into it.” And you become some sort of stage manager rather than a playwright, all because your wife is in the play.

Anyway, it was getting pretty desperate. So two of the guys in the play—Mickey Knox, an actor of twenty years and one of my best and oldest buddies, and Buzz Farbar, a pal who had a part in *The Deer Park* as a kind of gag—would go off to the side of the bar where we drank every night.

And we began playing this game. We began improvising, to take on parts. I was like the head of the gang, very Mafia. These guys were like my hoods and I was lecturing them all the time.

We had absolutely fantastic stuff going as we were drinking, stuff that was far better than anything we ever came close to in the movie that grew out of those evenings (*Wild 90*). It got so good at a certain point I said, “Jesus, isn’t it a shame that we can’t film it? All we’d need is a cameraman and a sound track. Warhol is doing this very interesting stuff with his kind of people. And I think it’d be fun to try something altogether different. Instead of being ourselves, let’s see what we’re like as movie actors.”

So Farbar looked around. He was working at CBS at the time. And he happened to run into Donn Pennebaker. I didn’t know anything about him at the time. We met for a drink. And Pennebaker was sort of intrigued by the idea. He’s not only a marvelously gifted photographer but he has an odd, very private aesthetic about film-making. He’s an innovator and a discoverer. He loves anything that’s new, any new way of approaching the idea of film. Film is almost an object of religious veneration for him. He’d made a number of documentaries over the years and had just finished his Bob Dylan film (*Don’t Look Back*, 1967), and our project seemed curious to him. So he said, “All right, we’ll film for a couple of nights.”

We figured out that what we’d do was he’d contribute his services for part of the film and give us the editing equipment and we’d pay for the raw stock, which was supposed to cost about \$1000—it turned out to be \$1500. At the time I had quite a bit of money, and I thought: “Gee, that’s a good way to blow a thousand dollars. Better than going to Vegas for a week.” So we blew it. We



Figure 13.1 Norman Mailer from every angle in *Maidstone* (1970). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

made the movie. Originally the film cost \$1500. Before I was finished, *Wild 90* cost about \$50,000—and *Beyond the Law* has cost about \$60,000 to \$70,000 by now. Part of it was just waste motion on *Wild 90*. I didn't know what I was doing. It should have cost about \$20,000 to make. What happened was that I got fascinated by the film as I saw the rushes. But the sound track was awful. There's not much going on.

So, finally, it can't be a successful movie because you've got three guys sitting in a room for forty-five minutes before anybody else comes in. And if you can't hear what they're saying very well, what kind of movie have you got? But at the same time, I didn't know how bad the sound track was going to be, because we had it in double system.

We had a magnetic track. And when you go from double system to optical, you lose something like twenty to thirty percent of your sound. I almost cried when I heard the sound track of *Wild 90* optically. I didn't know that. People kept warning me. But I didn't really listen. You know, you get in a funny daze when you're making a movie.

Gelmis: How serious a limitation are the sound recording techniques involved in low-budget film-making?

Mailer: Well, our sound's been getting better and better. We work on it and concentrate on it as we're filming now. Also, I'm beginning to change the way I cut a picture. For instance, often I won't use a scene now if the sound isn't good. I've come to recognize it. You just can't get away with it. You see, my feeling at the beginning was that there's too much attention paid to good sound. You give up a lot to get really good sound. One of the things you give up is the possibility of using people who are not actors. And that's a terrible thing to give up.

What happens is that an actor has a certain kind of psychological structure. Maybe one person in fifty is potentially a good professional actor. But half the people alive are good actors. We spend our lives acting.

Anyway, I spent about six months cutting *Wild 90*. It became my hobby. I'd been without a hobby for a couple of years. I'd put on some weight. I hadn't been skiing for a few years. And I was doing nothing but write, drink, and have a life, more or less. This was really the first new thing I'd become interested in. I just loved cutting. I love the sort of—if you will—the metaphysical problems involved. The ethical problems. The moral problems.

Gelmis: What are the metaphysics of cutting?

Mailer: It's the extraordinary reality. When you cut from one piece of film to another, you are creating a truth. And this truth is intangible, because it's images. By putting images together in one way, you have one truth, and by putting them together in another way you have another truth. I realize that, in a way, it's very much like writing.

Getting toward the statement is like writing, in that the same sort of taste could be used. One of the things that's been said about *Beyond the Law* that I think is true in a funny way is they say: "The amazing thing about it is it's as if you wrote the screenplay. It's all you." Well the reason it's *all* me, despite the fact that everyone improvised his own lines and there was no script, is that I cut it to my taste.

Granted, I chose people who represented part of my vision. But finally it was in the cutting. Because when I saw the rushes for *Beyond the Law* there was a lot I liked and a lot I detested. Obviously what I liked was the part that fit the particular vision I had of what this reality was. What

I was trying to do in *Beyond the Law* was to create the reality, if you will, below the reality, beneath the reality, within the reality of an evening in a police station.

I think that cops and criminals are incredible people. No one's ever begun to deal with how fantastic they are in their love-hate relation. It's like the relation between two linemen in professional football. What goes on between them in the course of the game is closer than a marriage. They know each other in ways that are incommunicable.

Gelmis: In *The Armies of the Night* you spoke to them as cops and crooks and then qualified it to "actually detectives and suspects." Why the fine distinction?

Mailer: It's rude and inaccurate to say, "cops and criminals." These people are suspects. We don't know whether they're criminals or not. But finally it comes down to cops and crooks anyway. And that's the relation. Because whether you're innocent or guilty, when you're in a police station you're treated as if you're a crook. So existentially you are a crook. At the moment, everything in you is reacting as a crook. You're in trouble. You're now beyond the law.

Gelmis: I've heard that you shoot twenty scenes and discard nineteen, rather than shoot twenty takes of the same scene and just pick the one you like.

Mailer: That's true. I don't like to go back. In *Maidstone*, I shot a couple of things twice, just to see. Because you know I feel that if the vocabulary of film-making goes from A to Z and people like Bergman and Godard and Antonioni are somewhere between T and W,X,Y, or Z, I've gone from A to C. I mean, it's not a matter of being modest, just a matter of recognizing the simple truth that I know very little about making films. I got interested. They caught me, entrapped me.

Gelmis: *Wild 90* was an expensive experiment and unpopular with the critics. Why did you make your second film, *Beyond the Law*?

Mailer: I had already shot *Beyond the Law* before the reviews came out on *Wild 90*. And a lot of people had loved *Wild 90* before it opened in a theater, when they saw it privately and could hear the soundtrack. So when I shot *Beyond the Law* I didn't shoot it as a loser. I shot it as a guy who had found an interesting way to make a film.

Gelmis: Was there a particular part of the experience that made you want to continue and to commit months of your life and energies and more of your bankroll to film-making?

Mailer: Something in the experience had turned me on. You know this so well, we're writers. So we spend our lives working with words. And once in a while we catch our hand in the act of writing and we're overcome with the mystery of it. It's a mystery. The peculiar power that we have, or the lack of power. The ability to alter reality in other people's minds by the way we use words, by the insertion of one adjective or another, bears such an odd relation to the truth—and what we mean by the truth is just the sort of *feel* of our perceptions. I think it was this mystery that drove Hemingway insane, or partially mad. Dealing with words is a mysterious matter. It's very insubstantial because they're just little pieces of dark curly pigment on a white page.

Well, working with movies, on *Wild 90*, I think I got back to the freshness of it as a kid. I felt the same sort of interest that I felt when I was eighteen and starting to write stories. It was wonderful when I was

eighteen and writing. To be corny about it, it was first love. And that's gone. It's been gone for a long time. I'm a professional writer now. I can do a job. And I'm very much like a prizefighter who packs a suitcase and gets on a train or a plane and goes out to fight an opponent in some town. It doesn't matter what the conditions are particularly. I still have reverence for writing. But you can't have reverence for something and at the same time not necessarily get much immediate pleasure out of it. I still get pleasure out of writing. But the *act* is not pleasure. It's hard work. But making a film is a cross between a circus, a military campaign, a nightmare, an orgy, and a high.

Gelmis: That sounds like chaos.

Mailer: That's the way I make films. If there isn't chaos in the making of it, then you can't get anything because everybody gets uptight. Because there's no script you've almost got to have a sort of chaos. It's the only way to get people relaxed enough so you can get something out of them.

Gelmis: Yet it seems to me that if one doesn't have good footage the best editor in the world can't do too much with it.

Mailer: If you don't have the material at *all*, then you're dead. But the art of cutting is to find material where no one else can find it. It's a little like a detective story. You can cut something out of nothing almost. In *Maidstone*, we have twelve-minute reels, and these are a unit in a way, because that's what a cameraman sticks in his Arriflex magazine. We shoot until the reel is empty. We look at the reel in the projection room and we all groan.

There isn't a thing in it that has any life. It's dead, it's horrible. Suddenly you take out the sound in a place and then you look at it and it's not a bad piece of film without sound. And then you see another piece five minutes later on which has a relation to this piece. Or you might get thirty good seconds out of that twelve-minute reel if it's hopeless, and it'll have an artistry and elegance to it. So that afterwards, you'll say: "How in the hell did you ever get that?" Where you get it is that you try to create a curious maelstrom in which marvelous facets of people will reveal themselves.

Gelmis: To make your cast loosen up, you create a *Mailerstrom*?

Mailer: Oh, wow, stop! I'm not doing it as a manipulator. Because I'm not in command of it, don't forget. I'm no more in command of it than a general is, in the middle of a battle, where he's fighting for his life. The way I make the film, I have to act in it. It's the only way I can direct it. Because there's no script, something has to be going on in scenes. And so there has to be somebody in the scene who really has some conception of what he's driving toward. It's equivalent to—you can't have a party without a host or a hostess. And the host has to be in his own party. He can't send orders down from upstairs. He can, but it'd be a very bizarre affair.

Gelmis: How have directors managed until now to make films without acting in them?

Mailer: They have a script. They have professional actors. They have extraordinary skillful technicians who work generally with fixed cameras. That is, the camera lens may zoom or dolly, but finally the one thing they're obsessed with is: no vibration, no jar. The film image must be rock steady. They spent forty years developing techniques to give them a rock steady image. It's the

most important single thing to a distributor. You get some of those distributors, they come to see a movie and the one thing they say is: "I like it so it doesn't shake." We're dead with our movies with the average movie distributor in a small town. He says, "You call this a movie? It shakes all over the place."

That's what we're up against. That's why there are certain respected film critics who detest my films. Because what I'm doing is going into the church. And we have to face up to the drear eye of the movie critic. And the movie critic is a religious man. Movies are his church. What I'm getting at is that a good film made without vibration has a magnificent quality to it, has the magnificence of a dream. You see, in a dream things don't shake. But the commercial movie, beautifully made, is an abstraction. It doesn't pretend to be life. It says that "we are some weird creature from the netherworld and we are perfect." And that's why it's not a light matter when there are imperfections in films.

It's a sacrilege. I'm committing a sacrilege when I put out a film which pretends to be a major film, a good film, a marvelous film and yet has certain crudities in it that are forty, fifty, sixty years old. For instance, my backgrounds will not be evenly lighted throughout. My camera will not be rock steady. Not every word of my films can be heard. The camera work will be spotty, brilliant at one moment and somewhat disappointing the next. I'll be in and out of focus more than is permissible. These are all terrible imperfections.



Figure 13.2 Norman Mailer and Rip Torn in a tense discussion in an outtake scene from *Maidstone* (1970). Frame enlargement from 16mm triacetate projection print. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

It's like that scene in Faulkner, you remember, in one of his short stories [*Barn Burning*] where the hired hand comes up to the plantation mansion and walks in over the white carpet with his boots and they're filled with cow manure. And as he walks across the carpet the owner of the plantation is so horrified he can hardly move and he gasps: "See what you've done to my carpet." And there Faulkner symbolized the absolute horror of one part of the south as it saw another part of the south rising.

You know, I've got enormous respect for the beautiful movie as a creature of the netherworld. I grew up with it, as everyone else did. And I love it. But I think there are other kinds of movies possible. And I think they could even transcend this.

Gelmis: On this question of imperfect films, don't you think that much of it isn't aesthetic choice at all but a simple case of insufficient funds that makes attention to technical polish impossible? Isn't it a rationalization of the underground to say that anything slick is bad *per se* and thus to institutionalize its shortcomings?

Mailer: Yes, they have institutionalized it. Jonas Mekas, for instance, has certainly tried to legitimize it. And Mekas I find a marvelously interesting critic because he's so passionate. I rarely agree with him on particular things, But while we're on Mekas, I must mention that I have love for him because he's one of the people who introduced me to movies, in a funny way.

I happened to see him on the street once and he said: "Why don't you ever come to see any of our underground films? Do you realize we're a lot of serious people? We're working very hard to make these films. And you [go] out to see them." A year went by. But I remembered the conversation. So finally I said to my wife, "Let's go over to the Film-makers' Cinematheque." And so I started going to the underground's showcase. And I saw about twelve or fifteen underground films in that period. *Scorpio Rising* (1963) was far and away the star of all the films I saw. Technically, it was exquisite. I saw one Warhol film, *Kitchen* (1965). It was horrible. But it had the horror of this twentieth century in it. The refrigerator is making too much noise. The beautiful heroine, Edie Sedgwick, has the sniffles. She keeps blowing her nose while the hero keeps trying to rustle a sandwich together out of wax paper. It really had the horror.

Gelmis: What was your reaction to the films?

Mailer: Something was going on, but I couldn't dominate it with my mind. The greatest intellectual pleasure I have is carrying an experience I can't dominate in my mind. Because I come out of a tradition of people who are born to dominate life with their minds. The Jews are the greatest intellectual machines of any species of man on earth. I think that's really the reason, beyond any other, why the Jews are next to universally detested by people who don't understand their fine, warm, tender, loving, and forgiving sides. The reason why every farmer alive, why every redneck, instinctively distrusts the Jew is because the Jews are intellectual machines. And they are, you know, more than anyone else. I grew up in that tradition. And I had a mind, when I was younger, which was like an intellectual machine. It wasn't that *good* a machine. In comparison with certain other machines, it was second rate. But it was a machine. It had that habit of dominating every experience it encountered. This went on for years.

And I remember that there were certain experiences I had—I mean, one of the reasons I've always been, in the view of critics, obsessed with sex is that sex is an experience you can never dominate. You have to approach it with—dare I use the word again?—veneration. Bullfighting was something I couldn't dominate with my mind. It took me about three or four fights to get to like

bullfighting. Once I got to like it, it was a passion. I lived with bullfights for a year. And the reason was, I encountered an experience that was larger than my mind. Something was going on that I couldn't dominate. I couldn't sit down and write a piece, which, as far as I was concerned, was a definitive piece about it. And I had to live with it and learn it and recognize that I'd never be able to dominate it. Boxing is easier to dominate because of the limitations of it. Boxing you can dominate to a degree in your mind, whereas a street fight you can never dominate with your mind. The greatest professional fight in the world is probably not as great a spectacle as the greatest street fight in the world.

Gelmis: Why? Because of spontaneity or improvisation or no rules?

Mailer: Terror. The terror of the audience. What if one of the guys starts to kill the other guy? Are you going to get in and stop it? Why do you think that big men always stop other big men from a fight? It's because nobody wants to face the ultimate chickening-out point. What do you do if the thing gets out of control? The stronger the man, the more it worries him. The less he can afford to discover at any given moment that he's a chicken. There are endless codes about this.

Gelmis: Even though I grew up in Brooklyn too, I managed to talk my way out of most fights.

Mailer: Well, most men do. Who doesn't? You think I don't intellectualize my way out of most fights? You think I pick up every fight that comes my way in the day?

Gelmis: I think so, but I'll have to find out for myself.

Mailer: Oh come on, come on. I'd have to stay in the shape of a professional fighter to pick up every small sort of subtle offer of a gauntlet.

Gelmis: Well, now, you've thrown the gauntlet down, because you ask if I think you accept every challenge. So let me ask you: why do so many people have the impression that your masculine ego, your image of yourself as a virile man, is somehow involved in almost every story you cover as a reporter-writer, as a para-journalist? And why do some of your projects, like your last film, *Maidstone*, turn into a brawl, by all accounts, where you and your buddy Rip Torn almost took each other apart and in another incident a young actor ended up in a hospital bed? What has that got to do with the artistic process, the journalistic process?

Mailer: On *Maidstone*, I'm just going to say: "Wait until you see the movie." I can't defend the movie before you see it. You're going to see the film one of these days. And when you do, you're going to walk out to the street and ask yourself the same question in a way that I think will be like a turn of the spiral. In other words, you'll be at the same point you are now but you'll have had an experience which will have you somewhat higher in that blue netherworld of questions. You see, there's the black netherworld of answers and the blue netherworld of questions.

Gelmis: And you're concerned with the blue netherworld of questions in your movies?

Mailer: I think *Maidstone* is concerned with the resonance of questions. A beautiful movie is an experience that you cannot dominate with your mind. That's why you film critics love a perfectly

made movie. Because it gives you no opportunity to start ripping the thing apart. When you see a movie that is flawless, one of the wonderful things about it is that you can't get in there and start taking something that was done sloppily and from there make an attack on a picture. Like, you guys are lovers. Everytime a movie critic goes to see a movie . . .

Gelmis: What's wrong with beautiful movies, or beautiful women for that matter? Why should we like a movie with problems or blemishes which might have been avoided if the director had \$500,000 instead of \$50,000?

Mailer: I adore beautiful women. There's nothing wrong with beautiful movies. Every time a beautiful movie is made by commercial processes, it's a miracle. But how many beautiful movies are there? There's *Belle du Jour* (1967). Let's think of another beautiful movie at the moment. I can't think of one.

Gelmis: What about *2001: A Space Odyssey*? (1968)

Mailer: I thought that was a bold, beautiful extraordinary effort in a way. But I'm going to tell you something. I slept through half of it. And the reason I slept through half of it was that I hadn't had any sleep the night before. I went there with my children.

Gelmis: Now you understand the critic's problem.

Mailer: Yes. But I still liked it. I got involved. But the pace was so slow, it was exactly the pace you would have on one of those interplanetary trips. And what would you do? You would sleep, so I did. I had regard for the film because it was an experience. And I thought it was bold of Kubrick to spend \$10,000,000 giving us an experience that was not on the face of its box office, and then getting away with it. I think that was splendid.

Gelmis: But you thought it was boring.

Mailer: Boredom has an aesthetic, also, in the commercial film.

Gelmis: Antonioni proved that.

Mailer: Yes. But I don't think Antonioni's films belong in the dream factory. I think Antonioni oppresses the critic to the point where you lose the feeling of splendor and living in another world that exists nowhere but in the movie. There's a boredom in Antonioni that's almost physical. It's like dealing with sort of a foreign personality; there's almost a physical impression there.

Seeing an Antonioni film, I wanted to punch people. I didn't want to punch Antonioni. I didn't want to punch the actors. I didn't want to punch the person next to me. I just wanted to take the chair in front of me and start breaking it because the movie was doing something to my nervous system that wasn't nice. I'd almost put the blame on Antonioni. It's half his fault and half mine. The only film of his I've seen is *L'Avventura* (1960). And I saw it again in the last year or so and found I just wasn't prepared to accept it.

Gelmis: Where does what you are doing fit into the film scene?

Mailer: The way I look at the movie business is that the commercial directors are mining one end of the tunnel and I'm mining the other. What they're saying is that I'm crazy and that I'm digging holes like an earthworm and I'm going to drown in my own stuff. And what I'm saying is I'm digging in from the other end and we're going to meet in the center of the tunnel and we're going to come in so close that we won't be an inch apart. Now if not me, another. What I do know, and they don't know, is that a movie can be made this way, which is interesting.

Gelmis: How do you feel about people who had violent reactions and walked out of Philharmonic Hall when *Beyond the Law* had its premiere there during the New York Film Festival?

Mailer: Novels are supposed to hit people where they live. You're supposed to read a novel and change your life. A movie is supposed to keep you living. That's why one serious critic said in his review of *Beyond the Law*, "Norman, you don't understand the movies. The movies are not there to hit people where they live. The movies are there to keep people alive." You go to the movie and you pay your money and you're supposed to have a good time. The horror of life should be alleviated for a little while. That's what most critics feel movies are supposed to do. But what I'm saying is that the horror of life has become so completely pervasive that movies no longer enable sensible and sensitive people to survive. It sickens them. The most beautiful movie in the world will sicken you, if you can conceive of a better movie than the one that was there.

Gelmis: You were telling me earlier how nebulous your plans were and how you might give up film-making if *Maidstone* didn't get a favorable reception.

Mailer: I don't want to load it that way. For one simple reason: I don't trust critics. I think every critic is schizophrenic. On one hand he's a count who's taking care of a mysterious surrealistic estate. And on the other hand he's nothing but a gang bully and a thug who's waiting for the first victim to come down the alley. So if you think I'm going to say for the record that *Maidstone* is going to be the one that proves whether pictures can be made this way or not, you're crazy.

I'll say that *Maidstone* is going to influence my mind to a great degree. I will be either vastly more optimistic or vastly more pessimistic about what can be done by this method than I am now. I will be confirmed or denied in my present vision. *Maidstone* is not necessarily it. But it is possible that when I finish it, I may say: "This is it." I may say, "Gang, if you don't like this film we have come to the parting of the ways. And I'm going to stop making movies and you'll be the guys who'll be crying in twenty years because nobody makes movies like Mailer any more."

Gelmis: Would you make another film before *Maidstone* comes out?

Mailer: I don't think so, for one simple reason. Everything is going into it: money, resources, time. It's going to take six months more to finish it.

Gelmis: Let me pursue the matter of cost, which has to be a serious problem in personal film-making. You said before that initially \$1500 went into *Wild 90* and yet it ended up costing \$50,000. Why?

Mailer: Because of overhead. It didn't have to cost anything like that. The fundamental error I made was that I thought it was going to be box office. I knew nothing about the movie business.

Never did more of a country simpleton come down the pike than your humble interviewee. To use the Army expression we once had, I didn't know asshole from appetite about the movie business. I still don't, by the way. All I know now is that I don't know asshole from appetite.

In those days I thought that was the way to make a quick buck believe it or not. So I thought, "Well, we've got to distribute this thing. We've got something that nobody's ever come across. I mean, this is magical, this is fantastic. We're going to knock the movie business on its ass." So not only were we making a movie, but we were trying to set up a distribution business. We had overhead. It took us six months to make the movie. And all the while it was costing us at least \$1000 a week. It was a luxury operation at that time, compared to the small staff we've got working now.

Gelmis: How were you financing the operation? From the magazine articles and book sales and the movie rights from *An American Dream*?

Mailer: Right. All the ignoble money I got from *An American Dream*, which I understand, because I haven't seen it, is one of the worst movies ever made . . .

Gelmis: Why haven't you see it?

Mailer: Because I'm close enough to the violence not to want to see it. *An American Dream* happens to be my favorite novel. I think it's my best novel. Most people I know don't agree. They think it's my worst novel. But, either I'm right or they're right. It would be awful if neither of us is right. Any at rate, it's not only my favorite novel but also I think it's the only novel I ever wrote that would have made a transcendently splendid movie. So if I go see it and see what they did to it, I'm likely to get violent. And I just stay away from it. It's like an Italian saying, "Don't insult my mudder." Friends of mine said, "Don't go see it." It's the first time in my life I've listened to friends' advice.

Gelmis: Would you make a movie of *The Deer Park*?

Mailer: I might. If I did, I'd do it with a script. Because the dialogue is so good.

Gelmis: Why make movies which are improvised without scripts, without dialogue written in advance, in that case? Since you're a writer, it would seem a natural thing for you to write dialogue.

Mailer: Well, this is what we're really talking about. The moment you know what you're going to do, you make a preparation. The moment you make a preparation, you're a step removed from the moment in life. You see, I'm an existentialist, through and through and through. And I have a certain amount of respect for the moment, because I think the moment is a mystery. The moment that there is not a moment, then you merely have programs. You're bureaucrats. You're bureaucrats of the mind, speaking to one another. You know what you're going to do and I know what I'm going to do and we're no longer talking as men across the table. We're talking as bureaucrats. Then you're concerned with your interests and I'm concerned with my interests. What's been agreeable about this interview up to now is that neither of us has been thinking particularly about where this is all going to go.

Every time I hear questions I feel like a kid who's in the study hall answering exam questions and I get flat and nervous. So, my feeling is that the amount of talent that exists but that's not approached is incredible. One of the experiences that I had in *Beyond the Law* was to see how good my friends

were as actors. You know I really think that *Beyond the Law* is a tremendous movie. I think in twenty years people are going to go to that movie and say, "But why didn't we see how fantastic it was?" I don't want that kind of credit for it. I didn't conceive it. I didn't direct it that way. I didn't dominate it. This wasn't my plaything. What happened was that these friends of mine suddenly absolutely amazed the hell out of me.

Gelmis: Why did you put the dozen newspaper and magazine photographers assigned to cover the making of *Maidstone* in the film as participants?

Mailer: If the movie was the kind of movie that shouldn't have had cameraman there, I would have barred every still photographer from the set. The reason I let all of those guys hang around was that this was a movie about a man running for president. So you'd have still photographers in every corner, wouldn't you? Part of the idiom of *Maidstone* is the still photographers clicking away, clicking away, clicking away. We have scenes in *Maidstone* where there are ten photographers visible in panorama.

For instance, we have the candidate throw a big party, a rather mysterious party. All sorts of documentary photographers are making a picture of his man's activities. Everyone says he's presidential material. So what we have is an absolutely wild party with movie cameraman all over the place. Now if it was another kind of party, a quiet tea, I've gotten to the point as a film-maker where I wouldn't want cameraman all over the set.

I don't want a false myth to start that what I do is to get fifty people together, pull down my pants, do A or B, here or there, and then say: "Let's have some fun." It isn't like that at all. There's an extraordinary amount of work involved. What we were like was a commando team. I had brilliant technicians because they're working under conditions that no Hollywood cameraman would ever go near used hand-held cameras, little hand booms or directional mikes, Nagra tape recorders, and whatever light was available. We worked fast, fast, fast. Each cameraman photographed an average of an hour and fifteen minutes a day during the five days we were shooting *Maidstone*. That's a hell of a lot of attention to demand of a cameraman. It's the equivalent of a writer, I'd say, writing for ten hours a day.

Gelmis: Do you think there's any validity to the nonlinear, nonverbal, nonintellectual aesthetic of movies?

Mailer: Yes. I think movies are in a different place entirely than novels or plays. In fact, my idea for a proper audience for *Beyond the Law* is not intellectual at all, because I don't think it's an intellectual film. I'd love to see *Beyond the Law* played in every slum neighborhood in America. A slum kid would feel about *Beyond the Law* the way I felt about *Studs Lonigan*. I read that and I suddenly realized, "My God, you can write about those things. They're part of art too."

And I wanted to be a writer. Reading James T. Farrell gave me the desire to be a writer. I think you might get some slum kid who's about to blow up something, one way or another—if nothing else, he's going to blow up his own mind, by taking too much of this or too much of that. Maybe he'll see the movie and he'll say, "I've got to make movies." And he's going to want to learn how to read and write and add and measure because of his profound desire to make movies.

These kids should not only make movies but they should cut them themselves. Because as you see yourself in film over and over again, you lose all the worst aspects of narcissism. It's really like having psychoanalysis.



Figure 13.3 Norman Mailer and Beverly Bentley with their children Michael and Stephen Mailer in an outtake sequence from *Maidstone* (1970). Frame enlargement from 16mm triacetate projection print. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

Gelmis: Do you speak from experience, in terms of self-image?

Mailer: Yes. You come to recognize your relation to others. You recognize that it's not what you thought it was. It's subtly different. In other words, you're not as terrific as you thought you were. It's wonderful that way.

Gelmis: What do you think of your performance in *Beyond the Law*?

Mailer: I thought it was good here and not so good there. I thought it was just good enough to create a character that a really good actor like, let's say, Richard Burton, could do fantastic things within. If you took that script that we've transcribed from the screen now and had Richard Burton act as Lieutenant Francis X. Pope, you'd have a memorable performance.

Gelmis: What did you think of Raoul Walsh's film version of *The Naked and the Dead* (1958)?

Mailer: Considering what they could have had, I think it is the worst movie I've ever seen.

Gelmis: Would you like to have directed it?

Mailer: I wouldn't have been able to. Someday, maybe. Someday maybe I'd remake it.

Gelmis: If you could write and direct your own scripts, would you work in Hollywood today?

Mailer: I'm not interested in getting a job in Hollywood. I have no desire in the world to write a movie script. Why the hell should I write a movie script? Scriptwriting has nothing to do with writing. The best scriptwriter in the world, ideally, would be a film editor with a novelistic gift. And those are qualities that don't usually go together. But the way things are happening these days, we're going to find some film editor who'll come along and be a born novelist and he'll write movie scripts.

I learned something from a bad review in the *Village Voice* of *Beyond the Law*. I don't have to agree with it. But the fundamental complaint was that I don't go deep enough into the art, that I'm not really willing to give myself to it utterly. What I have learned is that there's no way to get around it, making movies is a religious act. I haven't been a dilettante. But I've just been having an affair with the movies up to now. And if you ask me whether I'm going to be in the film business for the rest of my life or am I not, I'd have to say that sooner or later I'm going to have to make a decision. I'm not giving up writing in a hurry, I can tell you that. Writing may give me up.

Gelmis: Would you describe your method of film-making?

Mailer: Most movie-makers work off a blueprint. They have a plan, a master plan. They bring in technicians and talent. And whether they're working on a \$500,000 budget or a \$22,000,000 budget, it works in a corporate fashion. Everything is geared into the blueprint. It's an assembly line. And they can do marvelous work or abominable work, but they work off the plan.

What we do is to work like a military operation. We get a lot of interesting people. Very often we don't know if they're talented or not, but they are interesting. And we get the best technicians we can get who can work in this method, which is very demanding on the technicians because they're terribly orderly people and have to live in disorder. And then we make a raid. We attack the terrain. All right, in *Beyond the Law* what I was attacking was the old terrain of the Warner Bros. gangster and cop movies. I loved that kind of film and I wanted to see what you could do if you shot them in a more realistic vein.

Gelmis: Godard said that when he made *Breathless* (1960) he was trying to make *Scarface* (1932) but it turned out to be *Alice in Wonderland* (1951).

Mailer: In a funny way, I think Godard approaches films in the same way that I do. Which is, he loves these myths. He grew up with these myths. They formed him. So he sets out to make one film and makes another. *Weekend* (1967), which is one of the best films I've seen in years, I think started out to be *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). Remember, Godard was supposed to do *Bonnie and Clyde* at one point and they wouldn't let him do it. And I think there was a profound fury in his veins which found outlet in *Weekend*. He made an altogether different film, of course.

I think it was a tremendous theme. In a way, what he was talking about was the death of the twentieth century. And he was talking about the fact that we may all perish, that our salvation may be cannibalism. And I would have almost liked a more thoroughgoing treatment of the

matter. The only fault I have to find in *Weekend* is that it isn't pretentious enough, isn't grandiloquent enough. The man has a vision. There are parts of that film that to me are like Hieronymus Bosch. I'd never been a Godard lover until I saw that film. It converted me. But I still think there are terrible things in it. I think Godard is tiresome. He delights in boring the very people he attracts.

Gelmis: Are you referring to the two men by the garbage truck in *Weekend* who make long Marxist speeches?

Mailer: Yes, one of the worst moments in the history of film. He does it in every film. That's his trademark. It's like saying, "You're happy. You're enjoying yourselves. You're really enjoying my movie. This must come to an end. Now you'll be bored for a while. You have to pay your price for my movie." I'm against that.

Gelmis: During your own filming, do you use any kind of outline or notes or script at all?

Mailer: No, none at all.

Gelmis: Is it all in your head? Do you know exactly where you are going from beginning to end?

Mailer: Yes, I know where I'm going, more or less. That doesn't mean I'm going to get there. I have a precise idea of where I'm going. To continue that earlier military metaphor: I'm leaving from point A and I'm trying to get to point B, which is two hundred miles away, let's say, across enemy territory. I'm leading a commando raid on fixed positions in certain commercial-aesthetic territory. So I don't get to B. The bridges are blown up. B is no longer there. So I decide, all right, we'll take C, which is fifty miles from there. That's what a commando raid is. A commando raid is not measured by its aesthetic perfection. It's measured by the amount of life it generates, by the amount of stimulation it gives in military history and the amount of time professional soldiers will spend in discussing it afterwards.

What I'm getting at is, supposing I make movies that are only half successful but which stimulate moviemakers who are absolutely dedicated to making movies? What if people who are far better suited to be film directors than I am see *Beyond the Law* and get ideas from it they would not necessarily have had? For instance, I think Andy Warhol is the world's worst film-maker. But he's enormously stimulating to other movie-makers. He made every director brave enough to shoot a slow scene without trying to speed it up. I think what people will say in a hundred years is: "Warhol made the worst movies in the twentieth century and influenced more people than any other director around."

Gelmis: Is there anything in your experience in making three movies that is relevant to young people who'd like to make movies but have been discouraged by the idea that they can't break into the system or raise the money?

Mailer: I think there's at least one thing that's relevant. The less money they have, the more they have to know technically about their subject. If they're serious about making films, then obviously the first thing they've got to do is get their camera one way or another. And they've got to get a good tape recorder—a Nagra—and generally they shouldn't try to do their own sound while they're

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Figure 13.4 Promotional poster promoting a late 1960s screening of *Beyond the Law* (1968) at Harvard University. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

filming. I think just as a technical matter they should get a good sound man. They've got to get married to a sound man who's terrific. Because that's an art, it's a separate art. Audio is separate from filming. It demands a different kind of athlete, if you will. A different kind of aesthician. But they've got to find a reliable sound man because sound can make or break their film, as I learned with *Wild 90*.

Gelmis: But you found out that there's no viable way to distribute low-budget films commercially even after you've managed to make them.

Mailer: That's a separate problem. That's not really for them to worry about, in a basic way. The only thing they should worry about is making an extraordinary film. If the picture is fantastic enough, they'll find a way to distribute it. If it isn't, then they have a very expensive hobby. And they might eventually get to the point where they work at it and work at it and fail and fail. They're like poets, if you will. How does a poet make a living? The point is not to make a living making films. The point is to participate in the experience, which is an extraordinary experience—filming a movie and then editing it afterwards. Movie-making is like sex. You start doing it, and then you get interested in getting better at it. I believe that if somebody really wants to make movies, he'll make them.

14

MAILER, GODARD, AND COMPANY

David Sterritt

The most fraught and famous encounter between writer-film-maker-provocateur Norman Mailer and film-maker-writer-provocateur Jean-Luc Godard took place when Godard recruited Mailer to write an adaptation of *King Lear*, which was also to star The Author and his daughter Kate in 1987. Although the collaboration quickly disintegrated, it helped Mailer find producers for his film *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987); based on his 1984 novel of that title. More broadly, Mailer's high regard for Godard was among the forces that shaped his overall approach to the film medium.

Their personal and creative differences notwithstanding, Mailer and Godard held each other in considerable esteem for reasons related to their aesthetic philosophies in general and their film-making practices in particular. Although he was not a systematic or painstaking reader, Godard loved literature and read Mailer over the years, quoting him several times in his 1983 film *First Name: Carmen* (*Prénom Carmen*), which has its own literary provenance, being a (fast and loose) adaptation of Prosper Mérimée's 1845 novella *Carmen*.¹ Mailer had a longstanding interest in Godard as well. "In a funny way," he remarked in 1970, "I think Godard approaches films in the same way that I do. Which is, he loves these myths. He grew up with these myths. They formed him."² Mailer doesn't specify just which myths he has in mind, but the great mythos of modern America clearly fascinated him as a Brooklyn-bred, Harvard-educated writer whose 1948 debut novel, *The Naked and the Dead*, became a critical and commercial smash in the postwar era of American cultural, economic, and ideological ascendancy. And he is right about Godard, whose fascination with the American ethos—in itself, and as the power center of predatory Western values—was powerfully fueled by the Hollywood movies he voraciously took in as a critic and aspiring film-maker in the 1950s. Godard has directed (and written, in most cases) many scores of feature films, short films, and video productions since 1960, when his widely acclaimed *Breathless* (*À Bout de souffle*) helped launch him and France's nascent New Wave movement to the forefront of European cinema. Mailer's energies went mainly into his writing, which produced about three dozen books and a good deal of culture-world celebrity in his lifetime, but he also cared deeply about the six movies he directed.

The first two feature-length, *Wild 90* and *Beyond the Law*, were made back-to-back in 1968. *Beyond the Law*, released on the twentieth anniversary of the publication of *The Naked and the Dead*, takes place in a Manhattan police station where a handful of officers are interrogating, intimidating, and hassling a handful of suspects brought in on a variety of charges, all of which is intercut with a conversation between some cops and their wives or girlfriends in a nearby saloon.

Mailer plays belligerent Lieutenant Francis Xavier Pope with a conspicuous Irish brogue, supported by Rip Torn as a lowlife called 'Popcorn' and George Plimpton as the city mayor, who drops by to check on the discipline situation at the precinct. With all dialogue improvised by the cast, the film was shot over four nights that yielded eleven hours of footage, which Mailer and coeditor Jan Welt spent six months reducing to a final cut of 105 minutes.

Mailer said the film was intended "to create the reality . . . below the reality, beneath the reality, within the reality of an evening in the police station," and the title refers to his notion that "whether you're innocent or guilty, when you're in a police station you're treated as if you're a crook. So existentially you are a crook. . . . You're now beyond the law."³ Critical reception was mixed. *Chicago Sun-Times* critic Roger Ebert called it "outdated" and "pretty inept," while *New York Times* critic Vincent Canby found it "good and tough and entertaining" despite occasional lapses.⁴ *Wild 90* presents an environment even more claustrophobic and entrapping. Billed as "The Maf Boys" in the opening titles, Mailer, Buzz Farbar, and Mickey Knox play mobsters called Prince, Buzz Cameo, and Twenty Years, respectively. Holed up together in a drab urban loft, they kid, taunt, deride, and berate one another in turn, visited by others in the second half of the film. "I didn't know what I was doing," Mailer said when reflecting on the production, which cost several times over its original budget and emerged with a technically defective soundtrack that was close to incomprehensible.⁵ In her thoughtful *New York Times* review, Renata Adler wrote that the film:

[F]aces a problem that now confronts Mailer's work as a whole. The frontier has shifted. The battle against dead forms, useless conventions, and pointless inhibitions is over, or no longer interesting; the breakthroughs are now in terms of limit, live forms, tighter economies. The very urgency that Mailer has always tried to communicate makes it impossible to wade through so much rambling for a little art.⁶

Mailer acknowledged the film's shortcomings, although he felt the technical matter of the soundtrack was the worst of these.

The more ambitious *Maidstone*, completed in 1970 and published in screenplay form a year later, is Mailer's most notorious movie, thanks in part to its sizable scale—the action was filmed by seven cinematographers in spacious Long Island locations with a large cast—and in larger part to its climactic scene, wherein Mailer, portraying movie director and presidential candidate Norman T. Kingsley, is clobbered on the head by Rip Torn, portraying half-brother and hanger-on Raoul Rey O'Houlihan, out of the blue, with a very *real* hammer. Mailer immediately leaps upon Torn, biting the actor's ear and being nearly strangled in return; eventually Mailer's then wife, Beverly Bentley, portraying Kingsley's wife, Chula Mae Kingsley, breaks up the fight as Mailer children shriek with fear and horror on the sidelines, making the aftermath of the attack more harrowing than the attack itself. Canby was not much taken with *Maidstone*, deeming it "a very expensive, 110-minute home movie that has been edited . . . out of something like 45 hours of original footage"; musing on this, the critic comes to think that "almost anybody should be able to get 110-minutes of something out of 45 hours of anything, even if it's simply the filmed record of a chic, chaotic, five-day brawl in East Hampton, which is the [film's] raw, not-so-base material." The influential *New Yorker* critic Pauline Kael was more succinct, saying that as a movie director "Mailer didn't have much to retrogress from, but he managed."⁷

Mailer used his film-maker character in *Maidstone* as a vehicle for some of his own ideas about the situation depicted in the film—a sort of three-dimensional chess game involving a presidential campaign, the extremely mixed motives of the political operatives and fellow travelers on the scene,

and a plot to assassinate the candidate—as well as, more interestingly, his ideas about the film-making process.

He speaks out most directly in the eleventh of the film's twelve numbered episodes, when he and others in the cast step out of character and speak as themselves. At one point, for instance, the actress Bianca Rosoff, who plays Princess Barome, says that the movie's harsh tone has frightened some of the participants. Mailer responds that he intended exactly that, and continues:

You're still thinking of movies that are made where you very carefully structure them. You get the maximum out of each moment. But what I'm arguing for in this method is that you cannot make a movie that way and get anything even remotely resembling the truth. That way you just get a unilinear abstract of one man's conception of how something possibly might happen. But what I'm saying is that that's not the way anything happens. The way anything happens is that we have five realities at any given moment which then swing around [here Mailer twists like a skier doing little turns] to there, you see, or like this, do you follow?

Mailer continued his lecture in the book version of *Maidstone*, where a transcript of the screenplay is preceded by an account of the filming and followed by "A Course in Film-making" penned by Mailer, who refers to "the director" in the third person.⁸ "Cuts were like words," he asserts at one point:

You could put many an ordinary word next to another word but you could not put them all. . . . Godard made jump cuts in *Breathless* which no one had been able to endure before, did it all out of his experience as a cutter and from his artistic insight that the verboten had moved to the edge of the virtuoso. Yet, you may be certain the twenty precise cuts before the jump cut fed subtly into it, if indeed the jump cut had not become the particular metaphysics of that film.⁹

Mailer may be ascribing more calculation to the *Breathless* cuts than the hugely instinctive Godard actually brought to bear on them, but his invocation of metaphysics is right on the money for that film, that film-maker, and that pivotal film-historical moment.

At least three interconnected factors helped generate Mailer's experimental films of 1967–70. One was the blossoming of American avant-garde cinema in the postwar era, producing innovative films like Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (1963), which Mailer found superb, and Andy Warhol's *Kitchen* (1965), which he found horrible as a film but inspirational anyway, teaching him that "an uncut piece of film [is] beautiful" and that one's own friends and acquaintances can furnish a perfectly good cast.¹⁰

A second factor was Mailer's experience as a playwright, which transpired when he wrote a stage adaptation of his 1955 novel *The Deer Park*, about excess and decadence among the Hollywood set.¹¹ The cast included Knox and Farbar, with whom Mailer hung out and drank every evening. "And we began playing this game," he recalled later. "We began improvising, to take on parts." Pretending they were gangsters, they spent hours cooking up what they thought was "absolutely fantastic" repartee.¹² When the idea of filming the improvisations arose, Mailer ran with it, paid for it, and initiated his career as a movie director.

A third factor was the rise of *cinéma vérité* documentary, enabled by the development of lightweight equipment and propelled by groundbreaking works like Robert Drew's *Primary* (1960), Frederick Wiseman's *Titicut Follies* (1967) and *High School* (1968), the widely hailed *Salesman* (1968) by Albert Maysles, David Maysles, and Charlotte Zwerin, the French ethnographic film

Chronicle of a Summer (1961) by anthropologist Jean Rouch and sociologist Edgar Morin, and D.A. Pennebaker's *Don't Look Back* (1967), shot during Bob Dylan's concert tour in England in 1965. Pennebaker is a link between Mailer and Godard, since he was a cinematographer for all three of Mailer's experimental films and for Godard's never-completed 1968 production *One A.M.*, aka *One American Movie*, which Pennebaker ultimately edited into *One P.M.*, aka *One Parallel Movie* or *One Perfect Movie* or *One Pennebaker Movie*, finished in 1971. Godard's artfully mercurial films often contain elements shot directly from life—the hidden-camera street scenes in *Breathless*, for instance, or the interview with a teenager in *Masculine Feminine* (*Masculin féminin*, 1966)—and in 1965 he contributed a segment titled Montparnasse-Levallois to a French anthology film called *Paris vu par . . .* (*Six in Paris*), for which he prepared an amusing romantic story about a woman who sends letters to a pair of lovers but gets the envelopes mixed up. He then brought in the *cinéma-vérité* pioneer Albert Maysles to photograph the scenes as they unfolded without having read the script, seen rehearsals, or even heard what the movie was about. What compelled Godard's attention in this project was “fluidity, being able to feel existence like physical matter.”¹³ The result was an “action-film” capturing a time “when chance enters into the elaboration of the film, presiding over the encounter with reality,” in biographer Antoine de Baecque's words.¹⁴ Mailer used different methods in his experimental films, but his proclivity for the spontaneous, the intuitive, and the improvisational ran along the same general lines.

Mailer's final film was the 1987 drama *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, based on his 1984 novel of that title.¹⁵ The production's genesis was quite a story in itself. At the Cannes film festival in 1985, Godard and producer Menahem Golan signed a deal (on a napkin) to make a version of *King Lear* where the tragic hero of William Shakespeare's tragedy would be portrayed “as King Leone, as a sort of patriarch gangster . . . like a godfather.”¹⁶ The agreement stipulated that Golan approve the screenwriter, and when Godard suggested Mailer, the producer concurred. Mailer was hesitant, having heard that Godard was “hell on writers,” but changed his mind when Golan said he could write and direct *Tough Guys Don't Dance* in return. Meeting with Godard, who seemed frustratingly vague and “heavily depressed,” Mailer was asked to play the title role as well as write the script, and also to recruit his daughters to play the Goneril, Regan, and Cordelia characters. He completed a script (which Godard never read) and went to Switzerland with his daughter Kate Mailer to start the shoot. Conflict reigned. Mailer recalled to biographer Richard Brody in 2000:

I was hardly playing *King Lear*. [Godard] said, “You will be Norman Mailer in this.” And then he gave me some lines and they were really, by any comfortable measure, dreadful. . . . I said to him, “Look, I really can't say these lines. If you give me another name than Norman Mailer, I'll say anything you write for me, but if I'm going to be speaking in my own name, then I've got to write the lines, or at least I've got to be consulted on the lines.”

According to Godard, the biggest problem between himself and Mailer was a clash in working methods. Mailer perceived that “above all, I don't know very well what I want to do,” Godard remarked, “so he couldn't really have a discussion about it, he had nothing to do but obey, to have confidence in me.” Such obedience was not to be, and the last straw came when Godard insinuated that Lear, played by Mailer, would be sexually attracted to his daughter, played by Mailer's own daughter. “Is it a reasonable demand to ask someone to, in their own name, play that they have an incestuous relationship to their daughter?” a fed-up Mailer rhetorically asked Brody when recalling all this. He left Switzerland and the production soon thereafter.

Godard finished *King Lear* with a cast featuring Burgess Meredith as Don Learo and Peter Sellers as “William Shakespeare Junior the Fifth,” along with Molly Ringwald, Woody Allen, Leos Carax, and Julie Delpy in mostly brief appearances. Also present are Godard as Professor Pluggy, the sort of tragicomic oddball that he habitually plays when appearing in his own films, and Norman and Kate Mailer in a tiny bit of footage near the beginning. Critics have variously applauded and derided it, as often happens with a Godard film.

The happy ending for Mailer was the opportunity to make *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*, which premiered at Cannes in 1987. Set in Provincetown on Cape Cod, where Mailer had a longtime home, the film stars Ryan O’Neal as Tim Madden, an obvious Mailer surrogate—he’s a writer, a drinker, and a Cape Codder with a complicated romantic past—who wakes from a blackout and finds blood all over his car and a woman’s severed head buried in his marijuana stash; among the other characters are his father (Lawrence Tierney), his former girlfriend (Isabella Rossellini), his wife (Debra Sandlund), his wife’s ex-husband (John Bedford Lloyd), and a police chief (Wings Hauser) who has gone murderously insane.

Although it did not fare well with audiences or reviewers, Mailer stood by it, defending it as a “horror film” in Greg Carson’s short documentary *Norman Mailer in Provincetown*, included on the DVD release in 2003. It is better described as a super-hardboiled crime picture or a hyperbolic film noir, and some of its components—Rossellini’s performance, Angelo Badalamenti’s music, scenes shrouded in chthonic fog or darkness—put one in mind of David Lynch’s surreal brand of oneiric mystery. Godard’s influence also shows, particularly in a sequence when a Rolls-Royce is trashed in jolting jump cuts. The film’s generally hypomaniac tenor also recalls crime-related Godard pictures like *Made in USA* (1966), *First Name: Carmen*, and *Détective* (1985).

In the 2003 documentary about *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*, Mailer makes much of his decision to include a particular moment of over-the-top hysteria that all of his collaborators told him to excise or at least tone down: a lengthy swirling-camera shot of Madden on a dune, crazily howling “Oh God, oh man, oh God!” over and over in a moment of intolerable mental distress. Although he had no use for organized religion, Mailer took God quite seriously, and he had highly developed theories about the relationship between God and humanity, believing that God and the Devil are continually at war in every person, and that despite embodying vast power, God makes errors, loses control of the creation at times, and needs human help just as humans need divine help. “[W]hat I believe—this is wholly speculative but important to me—is that we are here as God’s work, here to influence His future as well as ours,” he said in a dialogue published in 2007, the year of his death. And again, “Live in the depths of confusion with the knowledge back of that, the certainty back of that—or the belief, the hope, the faith, whatever you wish to call it—that there is a purpose to it all, that it is not absurd, that we are all engaged in a vast cosmic war and God needs us.”¹⁷ Why did Mailer insist on retaining Madden’s heart-wrenching cry (“Oh God, oh man!”) against all sensible advice to the contrary? Perhaps because it crystallizes his conception of the symbiotic God-human bond, forged in mutual necessity and beneficial to both parties in the long run of eternity.

Godard took God seriously as well, most notably in *Hail Mary* (*Je vous salue, Marie*, 1985), his modern-day retelling of the Virgin Mary story; released just two years before *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*, it depicts Mary (Myriem Roussel) as a young Swiss woman who works in her father’s gas station, plays basketball for relaxation, and puzzles over her sacred pregnancy in talks with Joseph (Thierry Rode), a taxi driver. For both Godard and Mailer, theological reflection is less a route to revealed truth or heavenly salvation than a means of opening up thought to possibilities that exceed and transcend customary norms; they share an inclination toward spiritually attuned moods in

which they go beyond pondering the divine and identify their creativity as artists with the creativity of the divine itself. "Mailer's deity is much like Mailer," his literary executor and confidante J. Michael Lennon observes. "He or she is an artist—with the stipulation that God is the greatest artist—concerned most particularly with the human soul, but with much else besides." This is not a metaphorical position on Mailer's part. "It is," Lennon writes, "what he believes to be true. . . . [H]e has worked to forge his beliefs into a coherent catechism."¹⁸ Something like this, *mutatis mutandis*, goes for Godard also. God has long been an alter ego for him, film scholar Sally Shafto accurately notes, and he likes to think of himself as a "distant as well as omniscient creator," conjuring images out of light, which is both the material ground of cinema and a signifier of the divine.¹⁹ The theologies of Mailer and Godard are far from orthodox, but they are not merely theoretical either.

Returning to the secular world, Mailer and Godard are profoundly skeptical about the ever-growing sociological and psychological sway of American culture. Taking it as their responsibility to counteract the juggernaut by means of art, they fight conformity and materialism by drawing out bedrock constituents of the psyche—mystery, fantasy, paradox—that we habitually repress in the names of practicality and common sense. The essayist and novelist Jonathan Lethem captures this attitude well when he describes Mailer's core belief that "the uncanny symbolic life of our imagination resolutely [steers] the outward action of the legible world, no matter how much we might legislate it out of existence or deny its relevance in one realm or another." Two conclusions follow from this. On the level of group experience, "the pressure of the denied myths . . . invariably [makes itself] crucial." On the level of individual life, nourishing and cultivating "the realm of the symbolic, the self's own intangible dream stuff," becomes an essential task, if also a precarious one, always in danger of being abandoned or betrayed.²⁰

Mailer pursued hidden myths, dreams, and symbols first through writing and then through film, testing the idea that the resources of cinema—especially montage, which links disparate images into suggestive new configurations—can tap more deeply than literature into the some areas of the imagination. "If someone throws a hand up like this," he told me in 1987, making an appropriate gesture, "and the next (shot) is some birds taking off like that . . . there's a connection. You might not be able to name the connection. But somewhere in that deep, mysterious world of signs, portents, images, and hints, there is a connection that makes sense to us."²¹ Godard spoke similarly about montage as early as 1956, saying that a cut from a gaze to the object of the gaze can "bring out the soul under the spirit, the passion behind the intrigue, [and] make the heart prevail over the intelligence by destroying the notion of space in favor of that of time."²²

Mailer's admiration for Godard had multiple sources, one of which is that both he and Godard have refused to privilege fiction over non-fiction or vice versa. Mailer published a dozen novels, but his Pulitzer Prizes were won by two of his many non-fiction books, and Godard has swung continually among narrative, documentary, and hybrid modes, believing that "great fiction films tend towards documentary, just as . . . great documentaries tend towards fiction. . . . And he who opts wholeheartedly for one, necessarily finds the other at the end of his journey."²³ At the same time, both artists have a near-mystical faith in montage and juxtaposition as portals to a rich, enigmatic netherworld, and both take pleasure in flummoxing and transcending linear narrative by means of distancing, interruption, and discontinuity; for Mailer this dates at least as far back as the "Time Machine" episodes punctuating the narrative of *The Naked and the Dead*, and for Godard it has been a constant ever since the jump cuts that energize *Breathless*. In this area Mailer and Godard have much in common with (while remaining less extreme than) the Beat Generation writer and painter William S. Burroughs, who uses disjointedness and semi-incoherence to wage mortal combat against what he metaphorically sees as language-borne viruses of social and psychological

control dispatched by hegemonic powers to infect our bodies and minds. Mailer and Godard also share a mingled fascination and vexation with modes of expression (mainstream film, hardboiled fiction) that they drastically revise but do not radically reject.

Both also have a modernist penchant for valuing the primal, visceral, and intuitive over the sophisticated, temperate, and cerebral. In the late 1960s, when received ideas and conventional wisdoms were being challenged around the globe, Mailer and Godard felt licensed to express gut feelings of anti-establishment anger in exceptionally drastic ways. Godard's escalating rage at Western profligacy and injustice gathered momentum in the sociological critique of *Masculine Feminine* and the youth-culture parody of *La Chinoise* (*The Chinese Girl*, 1967) and then exploded with volcanic force in *Weekend*, his tour de force of 1967. It centers on Corinne and Roland Durand (Mireille Darc and Jean Yanne), a married couple who drive to the countryside intending to murder a relative and secure an inheritance, whereupon each plans to kill the other and grab all the loot. Their journey turns progressively darker and stranger as traffic clogs, car crashes multiply, historical and literary personages enter the real world, and pockets of revolutionary violence proliferate. In the last scene Roland is dead and Corinne is enjoying a feral picnic, eating a stew of human flesh in which Roland's remains are an ingredient. The film's final equation is savage and uncomplicated: capitalism = cannibalism. *Weekend* reached American theaters about a week before *Wild 90*, so it would not have directly influenced the content of that film or *Beyond the Law*, which was shot earlier. Mailer loved Godard's film à la folie, however, and this speaks vividly to his state of mind in 1967. "*Weekend* re-established my modesty," he told Canby, one of his most supportive critics. "It just knocked me on my rear!"²⁴ He curbed his enthusiasm with respect to a lengthy scene where three workers deliver political monologues into the camera, calling this sort of thing a recurring blemish in Godard's films. He reiterated the point in another interview: "It's like saying, 'You're happy. . . . You're really enjoying my movie. . . . Now you'll be bored for a while. You have to pay your price for my movie.' I'm against that." This notwithstanding, Mailer's analysis of *Weekend* is perceptive. "I think it was a tremendous theme," he said:

In a way, what he was talking about was the death of the twentieth century. And he was talking about the fact that we may all perish, that our salvation may be cannibalism. And I would have almost liked a more thoroughgoing treatment of the matter. The only fault I have to find in *Weekend* is that it isn't pretentious enough, isn't grandiloquent enough. The man has a vision. There are parts of that film that to me are like Hieronymus Bosch. I'd never been a Godard lover until I saw that film. It converted me.

Godard moved beyond *Weekend* in short order. Soon thereafter he formed the Dziga-Vertov Group with a couple of like-minded colleagues and set about making films like *Le Gai savoir* (1969) and *British Sounds* (1970), designed to exist wholly outside the systems of commercial film (which is pretty much where they stayed). He made a partial return to the marketplace with *Numéro deux* in 1975, but he has long since settled in as a cinematic outsider, reasonably content to dwell on the margins and work on his own idiosyncratic terms. He has always been a fighter and he remains one, never budging from the profoundly personal aesthetic that he has championed and exemplified throughout his career.

Mailer's three 1960s films proved to be as commercially unviable as most of Godard's pictures, but since his primary calling was literature, he was under no pressure to stay in the film-making game. He did no directing in the 18 years between *Maidstone* and *Tough Guys Don't Dance* and never directed again before his passing in 2007. While it is hard to see *Tough Guys Don't Dance* as



Figure 14.1 Reveling in the wreckage of Jean-Luc Godard's *Weekend* (1967). Norman Mailer in Provincetown in 2006–07. Photo courtesy of Michael Chaiken.

more than a minor genre piece, his three 1960s films constitute a small but enduring legacy, and their rowdy intransigence is lasting evidence that he was no less a fighter than Godard when his distinctive vision was in play. Indeed, he spoke of film-making in quasi-military terms, and in true 1960s fashion he placed more value on the activity than on its outcome. "I'm leading a commando raid," he declared, "on fixed positions in certain commercial-aesthetic territory. . . . A commando raid is not measured by its aesthetic perfection. It's measured by the amount of life it generates, by the amount of stimulation it gives in military history and the amount of time professional soldiers will spend in discussing it afterwards." And more sweepingly, "I still get a lot of pleasure out of writing. . . . But making a film is a cross between a circus, a military campaign, a nightmare, an orgy, and a high."²⁵ Making a film was also a mysterious enterprise for him. "I think fiction can intensify the moral consciousness of a time," Mailer told me. "I think theater can enlarge one's emotional appreciation of social situations [but] film doesn't work on our minds. It works on all the places that have never been worked on by other art forms—all the synapses between our memory and our emotions and our nerves and our sense of time." Hence the connection he saw between film and dreams, which he called "the interface, if you will, between life and eternity, between life and death. . . . Dreams, to me, are a dialogue between your soul and your self. It's a way for the soul to say, 'Look, you're not living in the proper fashion at all. These are some of the disasters, metaphorically speaking, that attend you.'"²⁶ Mailer saw those disasters, metaphorically speaking, and evoked them—along with attendant joys and triumphs—in films that are raw, flawed, and memorable.

Notes

- 1 MacCabe, Colin (2003), *Godard: A Portrait of the Artist at Seventy*, New York: Faber and Farber: 329. Godard's film pays reverse homage to the 1875 opera *Carmen*, replacing the music by Georges Bizet with string quartets by Ludwig van Beethoven and (briefly) a song by Tom Waits.
- 2 Gelmis, Joseph (1970), "Norman Mailer" in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, J. Michael Lennon (ed.) Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi, 1988: 173. Originally published in Joseph Gelmis, *The Film Director as Superstar*, New York: Doubleday, 1970: 43–63.
- 3 Gelmis, Joseph (1970), "Norman Mailer" in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, J. Michael Lennon (ed.) Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi, 1988: 159.
- 4 Ebert, Roger (1969), "Beyond the Law" in *Chicago Sun-Times*, November 4. Available online: <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/beyond-the-law-1969> (accessed December 6, 2015).
- 5 Canby, Vincent (1968), "Norman Mailer Offers Beyond the Law", in *The New York Times*, September 30. Available online: <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9F01E3DA1E31E034BC4850DFBF668383679EDE> (accessed: December 6, 2015).
- 6 Gelmis, Joseph (1970), "Norman Mailer" in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, J. Michael Lennon (ed.) Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi, 1988: 158. Originally published in Joseph Gelmis, *The Film Director as Superstar*, New York: Doubleday, 1970: 43–63.
- 7 Adler, Renata (1968), "Norman Mailer's Mailer: *Wild 90*, Another Ad for Writer, Bows" in *The New York Times*, January 8, *NY Times.com* Available online: <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9E0CE0D6173BE73ABC4053DFB7668383679EDE> (accessed: December 6, 2015).
- 8 Canby, Vincent (1971), "Mailer's *Maidstone* Opens Whitney Series" in *The New York Times*, September 24. Available online: <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9A07EEDD1F3FEF34BC4C51DFBF66838A669EDE> (accessed: December 6, 2015).
- 9 Kael, Pauline (1982), *5001 Nights at the Movies: A Guide from A to Z*, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston: 354. The brief production history is assembled from articles by Sally Beauman, J. Anthony Lukas, and James Toback.
- 10 Mailer, Norman (1971), *Maidstone: A Mystery*, New York: Signet: 168.
- 11 Dearborn, Mary V. (1999), *Mailer: A Biography*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin: 232.
- 12 Mailer, Norman (1967), *The Deer Park: A Play*, New York: The Dial Press: 14. It opened at New York's Theatre de Lys in 1967, directed by Leo Garen, and ran for several months, winning Rip Torn an Obie Award for his performance.
- 13 Gelmis, Joseph (1970), "Norman Mailer" in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, J. Michael Lennon (ed.) Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi, 1988: 157. Originally published in Joseph Gelmis, *The Film Director as Superstar* (New York: Doubleday, 1970): 43–63.
- 14 Godard, Jean-Luc (1965), "Montparnasse-Levallois," in *Godard on Godard*, Narboni and Milne (eds.) New York: Da Capo Press: 211–13. Originally published in *Cahiers du cinema* #171, October 1965, 9–10.
- 15 de Baecque, Antoine (2010), *Godard: Biographie*, Paris: Bernard Grasset: 249–50. My translation.
- 16 Mailer, Norman (1984), *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, New York: Random House.
- 17 Brody, Richard (2006), *Everything is Cinema: The Working Life of Jean-Luc Godard*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 492–7. This and the subsequent quotations regarding *Lear* are derived from Brody's volume.
- 18 Mailer, Norman and Lennon, Michael (2000), "The Rise of Mailerism" in *New York*, October 7. Available online: <http://nymag.com/news/features/38961/> (accessed: December 12, 2015). Excerpted from Mailer and Lennon's *On God: An Uncommon Conversation* (New York: Random House, 2007).
- 19 Mailer, Norman and Lennon, Michael (2000), "The Rise of Mailerism" in *New York*, October 7. Available online: <http://nymag.com/news/features/38961/> (accessed: December 12, 2015). Excerpted from Mailer and Lennon's *On God: An Uncommon Conversation* (New York: Random House, 2007).

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- 25 Canby, Vincent (1968), "When Irish Eyes Are Smiling, It's Norman Mailer," in *The New York Times*, October 27, sec 2, 15. Emphasis in original.
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Figure 15.1 The Director at work in Provincetown during the shooting of *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987). Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

DANCE OF A TOUGH GUY

Michael Ventura

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I had seen him once before, in Berkeley in the fall of '72, in a hall filled to bursting with the shrillest of feminists, the gayest of gays, fringes left and right, and literature professors leading packs of profs-to-be, all eager to bait a writer whose work was too forceful to ignore and too paradoxical to embrace. They were after something very like blood—its literary equivalent, some greenish substance, part pus and part sperm, that would surely flow all over the stage if one of them could get this guy where he lived, shame him in front of the crowd. It was like a denful of Daniels lusting to leap upon one middle-aged lion.

Make that bear. When Mailer strode from the wings to center-stage, he walked from the shoulders on down, his chest out before him, looking at the crowd with a greedy smile. No stew of emotions would be too rank for him, that smile said. They booed, they hissed, they applauded all at once, and he inhaled it as if to say, "Is that the best you can do? You don't stink enough!" They got louder. His smile got sly. They finally subsided into a vaguely hostile yet appreciative murmur. Everybody was having a good time.

The Sex Pistols were still six years away, so none of us knew that this atmosphere of mutually excited antagonism between audience and performer was pure punk. Norman Mailer was even more Out There than he knew.

I'd come early to secure a center seat off the aisle on the third or fourth row. To my knowledge no American writer had yet been assassinated or kicked half to death—not, at any rate, for his writing—but if it was going to happen that year it was going to be Mailer. At every level and in every niche of America, from Nixon to the Underground, somebody was pissed at him.

So that night I had a Maileresque idea of being a hero. I was skinny, unpublished, trembling with rages I could not yet name and stupidly eager for a fight. So I sat three steps and a leap from the stage, thinking that if it came to a rumble I was on Mailer's side. *The Presidential Papers*, *Advertisements for Myself*, *Cannibals and Christians* and *The Prisoner of Sex* had been intellectually crucial to any vision of America I was ever going to have, and Mailer's intensity as an essayist had shown us all what was possible in that form; *The Deer Park* and *An American Dream* were novels that taught me that I wasn't crazy, or if I was crazy, I wasn't alone in how I felt my magic; so I figured I owed Mailer. I'm sure my fantasy went something like: We'd fight side by side, get the shit kicked out of us, and later he'd read my stuff and introduce me to Mr. Simon, Mr. Schuster, Mr. Scribner and whoever else published masterpieces. (The inner life of a serious unpublished writer is humid with such fantasies—they fog his eyes from the inside.)

But, alas, I had underestimated Mailer's ability to defuse a crowd. He opened by announcing that he'd come with important tidings and that he didn't want to be interrupted every other line, so would the feminists and gays please do their hissing and booing now. They hissed and booed to fare-thee-well. When the last hiss faded he peered over the podium, waited a beat and said:

O-beeed-iant little bitches, aren't you?

It was a ploy that had to work beautifully or start a riot, and it worked beautifully. This was a house that could appreciate a masterstroke when it saw one, and it applauded accordingly. There would be a couple of demonstrations—gays dressed as pricks dancing on the stage, that sort of thing; there would be arguments; there would be cat-calls and boos at various pronouncements; but the crowd was in his hands that night. It was clear that my desperate assistance would not be needed.

Fifteen years later, early last month . . . I finally met Mr. Norman Mailer, or whoever that was, walking across the patio of the Sunset Marquis—a different walk, a sailor's walk, an old sailor's at that, an easy roll from the hips. Mid-60ish, gray, and a little shorter than me, robustly affable, a sweet sparkle in his blue eyes (as blue as Paul Newman's, as blue as Bob Dylan's), his voice richly modulated and gentle. His manner was courtly, in a sense that you almost never see in his country, that of a man whose manners are absolutely right for him. The presence of a man, in short, with nothing to prove.

Norman who?

I'd never met anyone so different in private from what he had appeared to be, for so long, in public. He had the humility of one who has found the limits of his rage. Twenty or so books, six marriages, umpteen "newsworthy" hassles, thousands of public appearances, each met (if we are to believe the writing, and I do) as an exploration, a test, an attempt "to take an existential turn, to walk into a nightmare" . . . seemed to have produced a radiant, Zen-like air.

Of course, I was meeting Mailer in his capacity as film director, and directors (considering the demands of their business) are a suspiciously calm lot. It is a calm achieved by enacting one's excesses through others. And while, as a dynamic, it is not all that different from many marriages and nearly all child-rearing, it is certainly one of the dirty little pleasures of directing.

But no, Mailer had lived enough of his excesses for one to feel that he'd come by this surprising presence honestly. Two hours of movie talk will solve no mysteries, and yet . . . for anyone to whom he's been important, either as a teacher or as an antagonist, it's worth reporting that Mailer's attentive, interested calm (which in contrast to the public persona was just this side of eerie) seemed finally to be the signature of that rarest creature of all: one who has gone his distance and can look in his mirrors without shame, artifice, or surprise.

"Cinema—that river enema of the sins . . ." is how Norman Mailer once defined the art that has obsessed him for so long. (*The Deer Park*, his best novel, is also the best of the Hollywood novels.) He meant for *Tough Guys Don't Dance* to live up to that definition and it does.

It was the least of his novels, an overworked rehash of the critically savaged, badly underrated *An American Dream*. *Tough Guys'* prose feels forced and its tone is strained. It's the only Mailer book in which the writing itself—the life within the sentences—is flat. So it was the obvious choice for Mailer's first "mainstream" film, because it could make a better movie than a novel. Years ago he'd written why: "Great novels invariably make the most disappointing movies, and modest novels (like *The Asphalt Jungle*) sometimes make very good movies. It is because the original conception in modest novels is less special and so more capable of being worked upon by any number of other writers, directors and actors."

As a screenwriter, Mailer has cut his own novel to ribbons, thrown out most of what was warmed-over from *An American Dream*, condensed and improved the dialogue to an extraordinary degree, then gone on to rethink the accepted form of film as well.

"Somebody said, 'You know, you only see one policeman in the entire film,'" Mailer explained. "It isn't really true. You do see a couple of other cops once, but there isn't any of the paraphernalia of the policeman. A policeman is a member of a team. You never see a crime movie that has just one cop, like this one has. You have five cops, you have eight cops, you have people working at typewriters when you come to police headquarters. And my thing was, cut all that out. That's all part of the crap. We know there's a guy typing in a police station. Just show our cop. Don't get into the paraphernalia of things, because the awful, awful thing is that movies have become nothing but paraphernalia. You start getting into props, and there's no end to the props, and every prop has to be researched, and you have to photograph it properly, because if you don't photograph a prop properly it's a detriment to your film, it's a squashed fly on the wall. So I ended up abstracting the story in this way. My feeling was: abstract, abstract, abstract, get down to the ultimate core and see what happens."

He does this with scene structure and character development as well, so from the first to the last nearly every scene is either a climax or a tense prelude to a climax. In the film's first conversation, Tim Madden (Ryan O'Neal, in his finest performance in a long time) is trying to tell his father, or not tell his father, that he may have killed a woman, but he can't remember. At the same time his father, Dougy (Lawrence Tierney), is telling Tim that he has cancer. Deaths are talking to deaths.

In most Hollywood films both of these speeches would be tearful, climactic scenes. But for Mailer, they are an underplayed prelude. The purpose is to let in the Spirits. Dougy says that now that the doctors say he's terminal, "the Spirits circle around my bed and they tell me to dance. I tell 'em, 'Tough guys don't dance.' They tell me, 'Keep dancin'.'"

Cut from that conversation to:

Dancing. A party. The cop, Regency (superbly played by Wings Hauser), has as deft and juicy an entrance as I've seen. He, Tim, and Tim's witchy wife Patty Lareine (Debra Sandlund) are standing on a stair landing, hovering above the dancers, talking good trash.

Tim: You trying to wake up all the ghosts in Helltown?

Patty: That's the idea—don't let the motherfuckers sleep.

Regency: Lady, you sound like a witch.

Patty: All good blondes are.

Tim: You're not a real blond.

Patty: My pussy hair was yellow in high school till I went out and scorched *it* with the football team.

A line she knows enough to exit on.

(At this point, the movie is still holding its most inventive character in reserve, one Wardley Meeks III, played by a brilliant young actor named John Bedford Lloyd, who gets to say, so mournfully and wistfully, "I see such odd things when I pull a trigger.")

So however centered Mailer may have become, he still has livid things to say. Or to put it another way, unlike Updike and Bellow, Mailer won't comfort his readers by couching his meanings

in that upscale world they aspire both to achieve and protect. There are no hiding places in a Mailer story, nowhere to retreat to. For Mailer, comfort can cause cancer, and every plot resolution leads his characters willy-nilly toward the next abyss—for the abyss is the only place where tough guys can dance.

Most Hollywood movies start with their characters in relative safety, take them into jeopardy, then pull them back. Safety at the beginning is crucial to the form, otherwise there can be no reassuring and/or tragic ending. Mailer's aesthetic is too stringent for that. He knows, and we know, that people who start off talking to each other like these do are already incapable of taking refuge in normalcy. They begin in jeopardy, and any meaning they come to will have to leave them in jeopardy as well.

When this aesthetically orgiastic commitment to a movie of climaxes doesn't quite come off, it's laughable. Ryan O'Neal, having just found out the worst about his wife, stands by the sea and hysterically repeats, "Oh man! Oh God! Oh man! Oh God! Oh man! Oh God! . . ."

Oh man. Awful.

Yet a couple of beats later there's a riveting speech by Regency that throws you back on the murderer in yourself—if you're the least bit turned on by what's turned him on.

In other words: Norman Mailer is a good director, with an inspired sense of casting, and blessed by the tense and beautiful cinematography of "visual consultant" John Bailey. In fact, Mailer's a director who's strung together enough memorable scenes for a dozen movies, and strung them on a precisely convoluted plot. Which is to say, a plot intentionally hard to follow in order that the essence of each scene can be experienced without the distraction of story. And yet, the story is there, strong, if that's what you want to pay attention to.

It adds up to: Mailer's film-making is as adventurous as his writing. Aside from that, *Tough Guys Don't Dance* is what in America we've come to call "entertainment": Everyone gets laid, and most everyone gets



Figure 15.2 The séance sequence sets off the existential noir narrative of Mailer's 1987 film *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

killed. It's a juicy film, and well-made to boot, but it's not a great film, and has no grand meaning. Yet its intentions are not small. For it draws us into that netherworld between the masturbation fantasy and the declaration of love—into that place where need and fear meld into what passes, in the good old USA, for sex.

Ventura: You once said that movies are more primitive than literature. What did you mean?

Mailer: I think movies go deeper into the psyche. That's what I meant by more primitive. Years ago I said that if you were to set up a spectrum of sex, memory, dream and death, you could put film between memory and dream and have no trouble at all. There's a psychic artifact that exists there.

Ventura: I think that's what Josef Von Sternberg must have been referring to when he said, "I think the cinema has been here since the beginning of the world." That the fact of cinema seems to leap ready-made from some depth of the psyche, as though it has been waiting there all along.

Mailer: Whereas literature calls on many other factors. Literature is really much more social than film. Film is tribal. When you read a book, it involves the room you're sitting in, whether you're happy in that room, whether your social situation in life is appealed to by this book, or depressed by this book. If we read Hemingway, we're depressed by the fact that we're sedentary in relation to his heroes, that they're having more exciting lives than we're having, and that depresses us. If we read Henry James, we're wistful that we don't know the nuances of society the way his people do. But when we're in a movie, if the movie's good enough, we don't know whether we're perceiving something about life or entering something deeper, in the nature of dreams—those mysterious transactions that go on in dreams.

So what I love about film is that it's spooky. Film is viscerally spooky. A film that's not spooky is, by this arrogant definition, a bad film. To the degree that a film has nothing spooky in it, it's meretricious, wholly meretricious, it's a money machine, it's filmed theater of a low sort. So you can imagine the directors I love. I love Bunuel, I love Bergman, I love Coppola—he always had a touch of the spooky in everything he does. I love Fellini, because in the middle of all that gaiety it's so spooky.

Ventura: The obvious question: Why movie-making now, again, instead of another novel, say? Have you become bored with writing?

Mailer: I didn't go to movie direction because I was bored with writing. I wasn't bored with it, but I felt burnt out to a degree. I thought that I needed a change, a big change, in my life for a year or two. Because I'd got to the point where I really hated the process of going in every day and facing an empty page and having to contend with the essential unhealthiness of writing. We sit there, we grind our guts and squeeze them to get a few words—at least I do. And I'm always in worse physical shape when I finish a book than when I start. Always. So I just needed to do something that was altogether different.

What I love about movie-directing is that it has nothing to do with writing. On a day-to-day basis it's the exact opposite. When you direct you use every part of your experience that you can't put into writing, all the little things that you've learned over the years that you can't use when you're writing a book. Particularly when you're writing a novel, you tend to focus on what belongs to that

novel, and all sorts of things that you're also interested in never get into that novel. They really have no occupational life for a couple of years. They hang around in you, collecting psychic fat.

Suddenly when you're making a movie you're making decisions on a hundred different things in a day. You're making the decision on whether the food's good enough. Some of the people have been complaining lately about the food—and morale is everything on a movie set. One of the ways in which a movie set is like a military campaign is morals: If you have bad morals in your troops, you're in a lot of trouble. So you've got to ask yourself the question, "Is this just ordinary grouching about the food, or is the food really getting a little sub par?" That's a serious question, and you've got to answer it for yourself.

Then the hairdresser comes up with the actress who's playing that day, "What do you think of the hairdo, Mr. Mailer?" Now, I've been married six times, and through six marriages I've said to my wife, "Uh, honey, I'd like a little curl there, uh . . ." "Get lost, will you! You don't know anything about hair!" But the hairdresser comes up, and I say, "I think you need a little curl there," and he says, "Yes, sir!" and he goes away. You're not only making decisions, you're being obeyed.

Shooting a film is so practical, so matter-of-fact and down-to-earth. The average good director is not really so much an artist as an aesthetic engineer. Movie directors bear the same relation to art as engineers do to physics. They're using the principles of aesthetics and mixing them with a great many other matters. You know, an engineer not only has to know the theory of bridge-building, he also has to know about the strength of the materials that go into that bridge, and he has to know about the reliability of the people who bring him the materials. If you're working with a crooked contractor you have to incorporate that in your estimate of the difficulties. So, in the same way, when you're making a movie, the strengths and frailties of all the people around you make demands on your sense of management, so you're almost never thinking theoretically.

Or you're doing a scene with a couple of actors, and it's a good scene, you'll get some pretty good results. You can get better results, maybe; maybe you can't. Do you want to gamble time? Time is your money in a film—literally, it's your money. If you don't get done with this scene by lunch, then you're going to come back in that stupor after lunch, and still doing that scene, and you're going to lose not half an hour or an hour, but two hours. So you're gambling. And that's exciting. And not only are you gambling, you're getting immediate results. Because you learn in the next hour or two whether your gamble won or lost. And then the next day in the dailies you see if it really came out.

Making movies, you're absolutely in the world, in the existential sense. Whereas in literature, you withdraw from the world in order to perceive the world. So they really use opposite sides of you. It's as though I've been using one of my two sides for 40 years, and now I can just leave that side alone for a year—wondering, of course, will I ever go back to it, or will I not? Nonetheless I can leave it alone for a year. And if it really still wants to write, that side, then it's come back—and maybe I'll write better than ever, maybe I won't. But at least I'll give it that rest that it's been yelling for . . . 10 years now.

Ventura: You've written a lot about the soul, and about how the act of writing brings you closer to the nature of your soul. Is it more or less so with a film, or is the issue completely different?

Mailer: I think you get closer to your soul with the book, but you get closer to the functioning of your psyche with a movie. Let me see if I can amplify that a little. I think when you're writing a book there are moments when you feel as if you're beaming a torch down into the abyss, and you see the lineaments of your soul down there. You don't travel down there in your soul, but you do

perceive it. Because in the course of writing a book you get out to some very astonishing places, and you do have the light of your intuition, and it does throw a long light.

When you're making a film, particularly after you've shot it and you start editing it, you look at the same scene over and over and over to take all the little dead spots out. Makes you feel like a surgeon. What it also does is it involves your taste, and your concentration. Seeing it over and over and over again you have to keep your taste alive; you have to exercise your ability to concentrate upon the same material over and over and over. And I'm the guy who wrote, "Repetition kills the soul," which I thought of many times when I was editing. But it doesn't kill it in this case, because it's not absolute repetition; you're chasing down repetition in order to alter it slightly. And as you do that, you're tuning your psyche.

When it's over, you have a sense not of how you think, but of how you move thematically within your unconscious. And one of the things you get is you end up with this lovely relationship with an editor. I had a fine young editor, Deborah McDermott. We really had a funny, sweet relation because the ultimate word was always mine, but the art of it was that we'd never get to that point. Either she would give in or I would give in, but we never wanted to get to the point where it was, "I don't care what you say, it's going to be this way and that's that." So that involved not only a sense of your own taste, but of someone else's taste. And because taste is the most graceful part of us, of our psyche, it was almost like a dance of tastes.

Ventura: I don't want to presume that I know what distinction you make between "psyche" and "soul."

Mailer: The soul, to me, is one's purchase on eternity. The reason I got into that 11-year stint writing *Ancient Evenings* was because I was so fascinated with the Egyptians—I had come across their notion of the hereafter, and it was close to my own: that the soul could die before the body. The Egyptians believed that after you die either your soul passes through the underworld and becomes eternal, or it perishes. So there was the second death within death, and that was the crucial death.

In that sense the soul is or is not eternal, but it's our purchase on eternity. The psyche—I mean, I wouldn't begin to know what its relation is, precisely, to the soul—but I think you could almost conceive of the soul perishing in life while the psyche would still function. The psyche is, among other things, that computer within one that takes account of all the factors of one's life and adjusts them and navigates through the obstacle course. The prime function of the psyche is to navigate through life. The soul could function with the psyche, but could be inimical to it also. It can feel that what the psyche wants to do is too mundane, too practical, too materialistic, too world-oriented. The soul may decide. "Oh, no, no, no, I'm in danger of dying if we go on with this course; I've really got to do something absolutely mad now in order to stay alive. Let the damn body die before me—then I keep my purchase on eternity." Which I think accounts for most irrational behavior in people. That's why certain guys will go out and drink themselves to death rather than do something reasonable, because at that point the soul really does want to die. Not all suicides are silly.

Ventura: *Tough Guys Don't Dance* doesn't go five frames without what most people would call "irrational behavior." So by your definition its characters are, in spite of some hideous acts and motivations, trying to save their souls. Maybe that's always been the great appeal of film noir? I've often thought that you could throw out every other sort of film (except maybe the Western) and still

have its equivalent in the other arts, but not film noir. Film noir does something that nothing else has done, and *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, like *Blue Velvet* (1986), is a contemporary film noir.

Mailer: You know, every dream is a film noir. If you think about it. Because every dream is utterly unsentimental. A film like any of Bergman's films . . . They're not film noir, but they have that implacable, impervious edge of the dream. No mercy in the dream. So that's why you make that remark, "If you throw everything else out, you've got to keep film noir," because that's the closest to film as an entity. The farthest away from film as an entity is *The Sound Of Music* (1965).

Ventura: But film noir has a persistent convention which I get off on while I'm watching, but which afterwards makes me mad, and that is: people can fuck great, then they have to be capable of murder. They have to kill. From *Double Indemnity* (1944) to *Body Heat* (1981), from *Gilda* (1946) to *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, if people are good fuckers, then they're killers.

Mailer: But again I say it's the logic of the dream. Dream logic is strong and central: Fucking is penetration, murder is penetration, they're equal. That doesn't mean that they're equal to us in the way we lead our lives. If you want to approach it from the psychological side, apart from film for the moment, it can probably be argued that great fucking has to touch on our murderous impulses. The charm of *Prizzi's Honor* (1985) is that it proved a law which I'm sure that not only Huston lived with for many years, but that he adored, which is that the only time you have true love is between people who are equally murderous.

Great fucking engages. What makes copulation great is that you express the best and the worst in yourself. One of my favorite notions is that we only work with great energy when our best and our worst motive find an identity of interest in the event. They both come in together. So when we're working for God and the devil at once we have huge energy—Oliver North! So in the transcendental fuck, the deepest parts of ourself are engaged. Well, I would just submit the deepest part of almost everyone alive has murder in it, because civilization is built on the notion that we don't murder one another. That means that the murderer is piped into the deeper regions of the unconscious, and is there to be called upon when we have deep experiences. What makes for great fucking, among other elements, is that the murder is equal between the two people. When one person is more murderous than the other in the act of love, they are left, male or female, with an intolerable tension that keeps one from real satisfaction . . .

He talked on, and it's on the tape, and it's pretty good, but my ability to listen stopped with that thought. For me, it's one of those thoughts that slits your life open top to bottom and makes you contemplate your unpleasantly palpitating liver.

And all the while, as he talked and as my street sense strained for confirmation of the genuineness of this peace, this calm I had sensed in him—all the while another current of words pulled at me, an undertow to our mood. Not that I thought of the exact quotes at the time. Still, they were present. (I had, after all, spent the last two days rereading pages of his work from the 13 titles—a number he'd appreciate—on my shelves.)

"The years pass into the years and we our time in lonely private rhythms that have little to do with number judgement or the uncertain shifting memory of friends" (*The Deer Park*). "For there was the law of life so cruel and so just which demanded that one must grow or else pay more for remaining the same" (*The Deer Park*). Because "the core of life cannot be cheated. Every moment



Figure 15.3 Mailer directs Ryan O'Neal and Lawrence Tierney in the dining room of his home at 627 Commercial Street in Provincetown for *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987). Photo courtesy of Adam Bartos.

of one's existence one is growing into more or retreating into less. One is always living a little more or dying a little bit. . . . The choice is not to live a little more or not live a little more, it is to live a little more or to die a little more" (*Advertisements for Myself*). "Not everyone can discharge their furies on an analyst's couch, for some angers can be relaxed only by winning power, some rages are sufficiently monumental to demand that one try to become a hero or else fall back on that death which is already within the cells" (*The Presidential Papers*). "And [I] had that knowledge which falls like rain, for now I understood that love was not a gift but a vow. Only the brave could keep it for more than a little while. . . . It had always been the same, love was love, one could find it with anyone, one could find it anywhere. It was just that you could never keep it. Not unless you were ready to die for it, dear friend" (*An American Dream*).

Those aren't so much thoughts as bones, what they find when they cut you open. The bones of his body of thought. The rest—his politics, his notions of God, devil and soul, his sexual theories, his aesthetics, this movie—are flesh and features on those bones. In the two hours we spent talking, what can I say but that I felt the trueness of those bones?

All his failures (Where, where, where is the novel of Marion Faye, the great character of *The Deer Park*, announced so long ago and which some of us have waited 25 years for?); all his excesses (Why were the bastards so important to you that you had to pose for them all the time, for all those years, until you ended up reacting to their reactions, so that their very mediocrity controlled you more than you knew, turning you into a dancing bear by the time the posing was done?); all his compromises (I mean the careful way you cozied up to the literary Mafia in the two years before the publication of *Ancient Evenings*, those cleverly polite interviews that made nice-nice to the world you had spent your best years rightly insulting); all the prices he had paid (for it had to cost him to tell me

that *The Deer Park*, published 30 years ago, was probably his best novel) . . . hadn't been able to break those bones.

Or so I felt in my own bones.

His prices had been paid; the distance from his first books to that Berkeley lecture to the Sunset Marquis had been traversed, and here was Norman Mailer, gentle, wise, yet still dangerous, and growing in a way that was utterly unexpected. For hadn't he just done a good job directing his first "mainstream" movie—if a movie with a line like "Did she ever give you a rim job?" could be called mainstream.

Faulkner and Hemingway are, in many ways, far greater, but both diminished by the day about age 50—frightening examples for young American writers. Maybe Mailer is going down slow, like the old blues says, but he is going down smart. Once in danger of becoming a parody of himself, he is defying expectations, escaping the role that has trapped him for so long. How many ever escape their traps so artfully?

And as I thought this, he was saying, "It's a spooky business, making films."

16

PULP FICTION IN PROVINCETOWN

James Emmett Ryan

I'm not asking you to read about violence so you can have a good read. I'm saying there's a lot of meaning in violence. That it's one aspect of a world-wide violence that appropriates us.

NORMAN MAILER (*Conversations*: 361)

A strange and sinister fever is loose in the pleasure-loving classes of America.

NORMAN MAILER

Adapted from his brilliant but unjustly neglected 1984 mystery novel, Norman Mailer's *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987), the first and only of his films to be produced and distributed with the support of a substantial Hollywood budget, was met with a chorus of negative reviews and failed miserably at the box office. Less experimental than his earlier efforts at film-making, *Tough Guys* benefited from strong production values, a cast of talented professional actors, and a sensitive grasp of its Provincetown, Massachusetts setting, an historically and culturally significant New England community in which Mailer had spent many years as a part-time resident.

Thanks to the attention he had received for his part in bringing his Pulitzer Prize-winning true-crime book *The Executioner's Song* to the screen a few years earlier, Mailer had the opportunity to bring his vision to the screen with the kind of financing and distribution muscle that he lacked for his earlier, avant-garde efforts, *Beyond the Law* (1968), *Wild 90* (1968), and *Maidstone* (1970). With the exception of *The Executioner's Song* (1982), which was based on a lengthy volume Mailer had written about the Utah murderer Gary Gilmore and for which Mailer produced a screenplay for director Lawrence Schiller, *Tough Guys* stands as the most important and widely discussed of Mailer's films. Nevertheless, a host of major and minor critics severely panned *Tough Guys*, dismissing it as merely a comic, gothic, and salacious whodunit. Contemporary evaluations of the film generally gave praise to cinematographer John Bailey's superb photography, which captured in memorable fashion the austere, lonely beauty of Provincetown in winter, but many complained of a baroquely verbose screenplay—the phrase “Mailer patois” appears more than once in the reviews—a convoluted and melodramatic plot, and a chilly tone of decadence inflected with splashy gore, narcotic and alcohol abuse, and unblinking references to heterosexual and homosexual acts.

Despite the generally negative reviews the film received, which were also critical of a very confusing plot awkwardly adapted from Mailer's novel, numerous strong performances were delivered. Isabella Rosellini as Madeleine Regency and Ryan O'Neal (Tim Madden) were deftly cast in the leading roles; memorable supporting performances by John Bedford Lloyd (Wardley Meeks III), Wings Hauser (Alvin Regency), and Debra Sandlund (Patty Lareine) carried much of the film's energy; and the film's hard-boiled bona fides were laid down powerfully in a remarkable turn by Lawrence Tierney as Dougy Madden, the aging but steely-tough Irishman whose son Tim Madden—an ex-con, sometime bartender, and failed writer—is at the troubled center of the film's lurid scenes of sex and violence.

It's ironic that, since *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, these same techniques and themes of baroque dialogue and lurid violence—which earned Mailer derision and ridicule by much of the critical establishment—in fact have remained staples of American film. Acclaimed Hollywood productions and premium cable TV series alike have in many respects validated and elevated in prestige Mailer's vision of American criminality and have continued to elaborate his insights about the tensions between American identity as virtuous and as prone to vice: the criminality undergirding the “exceptional” national character. To see the influence of Mailer's work on *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, one need only look to the career of director Quentin Tarantino, whose films have been both popular and critically praised since he first came to Hollywood prominence with his ultraviolent yet superbly written *Reservoir Dogs* (1992). Indeed, reflecting on Mailer's work in 2007, on the twentieth anniversary of the film's production, *Tough Guys* producer Tom Luddy observed that Mailer had achieved “Tarantino before its time. Long florid dialogue punctuated by grotesque violence followed by more long, florid dialogue and then more grotesque violence.”¹ Another way to put this is to admit that while failing by the lights of most contemporary film reviewers, Mailer's created a distinctive vision in *Tough Guys* of a national culture of amorality built on decadence and criminality, and he laid down a model for the following generation of film-makers interested in representations of crime and violence. It is in his consciousness of the national mood that he extends and revises the stylistic and narrative traditions of film noir, with its flashbacks, voice-overs, dark high style, and moral ambiguities.

Many of Mailer's comments in the novel version of *Tough Guys* bear out his tendency to extend the moral ambiguities of traditional film noir so as to move beyond exploitation to hint at a cultural critique with national significance. For the film, as with the novel to which the film aims to do justice, Mailer has in mind ideas and characters with considerably broader scope than the typical detective story, with its formulaic narratives and character actions. Instead, as Mailer later noted, “I wanted a murder mystery that was recognizable as such, that had characters as complex as those in non-murder books.”²

What Mailer delivered in *Tough Guys Don't Dance* was an uncensored frankness of perspective on American crime crossed with a sense of changing attitudes toward such matters as class identity, narcotics use, and sexual behavior. The flashback scenes unfold as a conversation between generations: dying father and misbehaving son. The younger man, Tim Madden is a Philips Exeter prep school washout, a convicted drug dealer who's done time in prison, and an active hard drinker and drug retailer. His story of betrayal by his lover, the striving white trash bombshell Patty Lareine, initiates the various strands of the convoluted plot. Tim Madden's father, Dougy, is characteristically blunt on the important issues, and as a hard-boiled but retired Irish longshoreman and bartender he minces no words when giving his son advice on matters of sex and violence: the two prevailing themes of Mailer's film.

It is also Dougy who warns of the association between wealth and vice. In the voice of true working stiff by contrast with his son, who'd had a taste of the upper class life before being



Figure 16.1 Mather directs a scene for *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987) at his home in Provincetown. Photo courtesy of Adam Bartos.

expelled from Philips Exeter for misbehavior, one of Dougy's first statements in the film is that "A guy who marries a rich dame deserves everything he gets." Dougy's is the voice of old-fashioned consequences and common sense. In response, Tim does not exactly disagree but instead raises the question of sexual identity by reminding his father that "You always worried I'd turn out queer," as though to insist that at least he'd managed to remain faithful to his father's ideas about sexual norms. But gender trouble which Tim tries to avoid is not entirely of his own making, as Dougy suggests during this conversation: "Certain dames ought to wear a T-shirt that says 'Hang around. I'll make a cocksucker out of ya.'" In fact, Tim has spent three years doing hard time in a Florida penitentiary, but he says he has done so "standing up" and thus has avoided any type of homosexual "dance." Father and son—two generations of hard-drinking Irishmen—appear to have reached a grudging understanding of one another. Dougy's instincts are unfailing when it comes to advice about sheltering Tim from criminal prosecution, but he's just as clearly represented as a member of a fading type of American male. A law and order guy who knows exactly how to handle a crime gone wrong, Dougy is terminally ill with cancer, even though he has forsworn his medications, citing nausea. It is also Dougy's up from the streets law-and-order mentality, earned the hard way on the docks and as a bartender, that allows him to serve as foil for "Acting Chief of Police" Alvin Luther Regency (Wings Hauser) a murderous Vietnam veteran and menacing sexual adventurer who brazenly smokes marijuana in his police office even as he conducts narcotics and other criminal investigations.

Law and vice in off-season Provincetown mingle for the most part with little friction. In his flashback recounting of the fateful night of partying that eventuated in his amnesia, his tattoo, and a severed woman's head placed in his drug stash, we are introduced to what Tim describes as a "crazy summer" with a wild night of disco dancing, cocaine, and caviar thanks to party girl Patty Lareine. Patty even welcomes Acting Chief Regency to the festivities, and he characteristically turns a blind eye to a scene of illegal drug use. Tim flashes back as well to his recollection that "on Halloween we had a séance," a hysterical event during which a drunken Patty Lareine planned to mobilize the ghosts of "dead whores killed in Helldown" a century earlier. In recalling "Helldown" as one of the historical designations for Provincetown, Mailer's film (and the novel even more explicitly) mobilizes a reminder of the Provincetown's multiple histories. Known by most Americans as a summer watering resort for artists, writers, and especially the gay community, Provincetown's actual history included not only the first arrival of the European settlers, the pious Pilgrims of 1620 who made their way later to Plymouth Rock but also a subsequent generation of criminals and misfits. In the novel as well as in the DVD interview for *Tough Guys*, Mailer is clear about his intentions to use Provincetown as setting in part because of its historical connection with the puritanical seventeenth-century Pilgrims who first settled it, and not just because of its contemporary associations with summer pleasure and sexual (and especially homosexual) license.

As Mailer, himself a long-time resident of the Cape would have known, before the twentieth century, Provincetown for centuries had been home to a transient crew of Indians, gamblers, hard-drinkers, rum-runners, smugglers, and mooncussers, the latter of whom often hung out false navigation lights to lure unsuspecting mariners to run aground. A popular criminal activity for many years in Provincetown was thus beachcombing the shores for valuable cargo washed in by wrecked ships abandoned by their pilots.

The duality of Provincetown's history of pleasure and crime meshes with the dualities of character and emotion that Mailer provides for the key players in the film. Reflecting on the five-day alcoholic bender that left him with amnesia and a ferocious headache, among other problems, Tim Madden calls his state of mind "Pure love, pure hate: all squashed together." Later, during a

flashback featuring his former love, Madeleine Falco (who is now married to the acting police chief), Tim complicates this perspective by his admission that “Love is just one side of the street.” When Madeleine (Isabella Rosellini) inquires about the other side of the street, Tim merely replies: “variety.” Sexual variety and promiscuity, which number among the vices to which Tim Madden is subject, are highlighted in the ensuing conversation between Tim and Madeleine, who navigate their way toward a road-tripping, wife-swapping weekend with Patty Lareine and her husband Big Stoop (Penn Jillette), a prodigiously endowed evangelical Christian minister from North Carolina. Laying her eyes on ungainly Big Stoop’s photo with the luscious blonde Patty Lareine as she and Tim contemplate their sexual road trip, Madeleine exclaims about the unlikely pair that: “He must have the longest prick in Christendom. There’s no other explanation.”

With Madeleine and Tim sharing similarly vulgar attitudes toward sexual commerce, it is not surprising that crucial to their sexual adventures are classified advertisements in the famously obscene *Screw* tabloid, the notorious yet popular New York sex weekly founded by Al Goldstein in 1968. With the help of *Screw*, Tim Madden tracks down Patty and Big Stoop’s request that another “young White Christian couple” join them for sexual hijinks, and the rest, so far as the film is concerned, is history. Adventures such as these, with middle-American characters like Tim, Madeleine, Big Stoop, and Patty Lareine joining what Mailer calls the “pleasure-seeking classes” lie close the central argument that Mailer is making in his novel and its film adaptation about the new national character, which he sees as advancing a program of sexual liberation but also a decadent narcissism and a criminality that is equal parts substance abuse, sexual Libertinism, and greed.

Whether these developments are signs of progress or symptoms of cultural decline, Mailer is ambivalent and evasive. Mailer’s evident lack of editorial judgment about *Tough Guys*, the seemingly nihilistic posture that he takes as both novelist and director, had consequences for the film’s reception. Hal Hinson, reviewing the film for the *Washington Post* upon its release in 1987³ savaged the film overall while admitting its “blasphemous originality,” remarking of the film’s dialogue that its characters “speak in a Maileresque patois that’s part dime novel, part *Screw* magazine, but his performers don’t seem to know how to play it; they look lost, baffled.” The occasional bafflement of dialogue and the confusing plot are undeniable, and yet the characters are so divided, especially in the case of the film’s protagonist, that bafflement or confusion may be part of Mailer’s point. Tim Madden himself is a divided and ambivalent man: sometime writer, sexual adventurer, drug dealer, alcoholic, prep school reject, and possibly (at first we are not sure, and because of his alcoholic blackouts neither is Tim) a murderer. Although Madden is anything but hard-boiled himself (the opposite is implied at several points), Mailer constructs his place in the story to be similar to the hard-boiled detectives of Raymond Chandler or Dashiell Hammett, but in fact Tim Madden is himself a member of both the unwitting pleasure-seeking class and has little moral or intellectual standing to carry out a sincere investigation of crimes committed.

Dualities of character in *Tough Guys* are typically based on questions of sexuality or violence, and conventional moralities tend to share space with criminal behavior and vice, as with blonde bombshell Jessica Pond’s revelation to Tim Madden during their first conversation that “I made X-rated films. Triple X-rated. Now I’m in real estate. Santa Barbara.” We are also given explicit glimpses of Jessica’s sexual daring, as the Santa Barbara real estate broker snorts cocaine before having sex with Tim Madden as her companion Lonnie Pangborn (R. Patrick Sullivan), a closeted gay man, looks on helplessly.

As for Acting Chief of Police Alvin Regency, he exemplifies old-fashioned machismo wed to new-fashioned attitudes about sexual license, to say nothing of his consciousness of his own

existential duality. Drinking with Dougy Madden, Regency brags that “Life gives a man two balls. Use ’em. It’s a rare day I don’t bang two women. As a matter of fact, I don’t sleep too well unless I get that second hump in. Both sides of my nature are obliged to express themselves.” The duality of human psychology must have been a pressing issue in the world of 1987 cinema. Mailer’s writing here unwittingly harmonizes with Stanley Kubrick’s vivid dialogue in the opening boot camp scenes of *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), which hinges on a collision between American values, existential philosophy, and the ongoing Vietnam tragedy. In the remarkable opening scene of Marine Corps basic training in *Full Metal Jacket*, the Jungian language of split identities appears in one of its key exchanges, between Private Joker (Mathew Modine) and a hilariously brutal colonel who screams at him:

Pogue Colonel: You write “Born to Kill” on your helmet and you wear a peace button. What’s that supposed to be, some kind of sick joke?

Private Joker: No, sir.

Pogue Colonel: You’d better get your head and your ass wired together, or I will take a giant shit on you.

Private Joker: Yes, sir.

Pogue Colonel: Now answer my question or you’ll be standing tall before the man.

Private Joker: I think I was trying to suggest something about the duality of man, sir.

Pogue Colonel: The what?

Private Joker: The duality of man. The Jungian thing, sir.

Like Kubrick, whose films would have been playing on screens at the same American cineplexes in 1987 and on the same home VHS tape machines a year later, Mailer’s *Tough Guys* in various ways asserts a philosophical notion about the profoundly divided nature of human experience, and he does so, like Kubrick, by referring to the social revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, a revolution punctuated and animated in significant ways by the Vietnam War and the new sexualities brought to public consciousness through the feminist movement and the post-Stonewall gay liberation.

Kubrick’s peace symbol on Joker’s combat helmet is thus analogous to Acting Chief Regency’s narcotics use and murders, or to Patty Lareine’s realization of the American dream through sex and subterfuge. So it is too that as Kubrick brings the American middle class into contact with the obscenity of industrial-scale military killing via *Full Metal Jacket*, Mailer in the same way shows how the once-sordid—and formerly illegal—practices of “pornography” and frank sexual dialogue now are indistinguishable with the quotidian promiscuities of the new American middle class.

Sexual dualities are on display throughout *Tough Guys*, as the nymphomania of Jessica Pond (Frances Fisher) and Patty Lareine demonstrates, but as so often in Mailer’s work there is present not only anxiety at the prospect of women’s sexual liberation but also a recurrent homosexual panic, which of course is profoundly ironic given Provincetown’s long history as a homosexual mecca. As mentioned previously, avowed “tough guy” Dougy Madden had been anxious with respect to homosexuality, and his belief that his son might have been destined to be “queer” is voiced during their first conversation after Tim awakens from his blackout on Thanksgiving Day.

Later Tim's prep school friend Wardley Meeks is suicidal in part because of frustrations related to his homosexual identity, and he threatens homicide and rape during his final encounter with Tim Madden: "What if I were to say to you, Madden, take it in the mouth or you'll die? Will you take my pride and joy into your mouth?" Minutes later, homosexual desires for his old prep school friend unconsummated, Wardley commits suicide while nestled in Tim Madden's helpless embrace. Even more brutal is the attitude expressed by Acting Police Chief Regency, who schools Tim Madden in response to Tim's naïve view of sexual subjects: "You read Pangborn wrong. He was a flaming faggot." Moments later, he goes a step further, describes the homosexual Pangborn, like the Vietnamese whom he had bragged about killing during his military service, as an object for recreational homicide: "I'm just a country boy, Tim. I'd like to kill homos." When we see Regency's photo on his office wall, showing off his jungle machete from his days in Southeast Asia, it is easy to take his threats seriously. Salt of the earth American country boy that he claims to be and yet shaped by the great events of his life time—war and the sexual revolution—Regency maneuvers comfortably if schizophrenically on all sides of conventional morals and justice.

Regency's is quite plainly the voice of a psychopath, an unhinged and yet domineering presence who has managed to situate himself in a position of authority in Provincetown. Indeed, there's a current of psychopathology running throughout *Tough Guys*, and the problem is stated perhaps most explicitly from the sexually voracious and fortune-seeking Patty Lareine, who with demure but sexually voracious Madeleine stand at the center of the film's concentric circles of sex and violence and find themselves irresistibly attracted to the sexual dominance of Regency's masculine character and Big Stoop's phallic advantages. For example, when Tim Madden inquires "How could you dig Big Stoop?" during their return home from the North Carolina wife-swapping adventure, Madeleine shrieks, "Because I'm crazy. This country's crazy. This country's crazy. I'm crazy." These lines are



Figure 16.2 Alvin Luther Regency (Wings Hauser) moments before his stroke in the final minutes of Norman Mailer's *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

the last ones Madeleine is able to speak before Tim careers wildly off the highway, injuring Madeleine grievously and damaging her womb, rendering her permanently sterile. Given the broader thematics of Mailer's novel and film adaptation, Madeleine's pre-crash statement was not about morality, or even about sexual ethics per se, but instead about insanity and the process by which psychopathologies writ large are responsible in the underworld of Provincetown, that most exceptional and yet most typical of American places. But it is also the kind of statement that cannot be understood without contextualization in Mailer's longer intellectual trajectory. Taken by itself, her comment seems strange, since in the film's screenplay Mailer provides no discussion about the form of insanity with which she's afflicted and no diagnosis for what has caused the nation itself to be "crazy." And the strangeness and lack of context for her remark, and others like it in the film, as with Tim Madden's absurd outbursts—"Oh God! Oh man! O God! Oh man! Oh God! Oh man! Oh God! Oh man! Oh God! Oh man!"—tend to make the script sound clunky, when in fact they are statements tied to some of Mailer's ongoing philosophical and cultural concerns. The film's lack of direct connection to those concerns is undoubtedly part of the reason it received mostly negative reviews. Put another way, *Tough Guys* is difficult to understand— and this is its most significant failing—without having followed Mailer's writing over a period of years if not decades. It is important to recognize both the banality of Tim Madden's "Oh God! Oh man!" outburst, but he delivers these lines at a crucial moment: at the very moment when he's learned of his wife Patty Lareine's sexual affair with the violent Lothario of Provincetown: Acting Chief Alvin Regency. Ham-handedly delivered at director Mailer's insistence,⁴ the lines register the twinned outrages that send Tim Madden into a five-day spiral of drink and debauchery: the violation of his own marital bond and the violation of legal trust by Regency himself, an officer of the law and yet manifestly one of Provincetown's most depraved criminals.

Sex and violence, of course, are central to these concerns, and thus the aptness of rendering Patty Lareine as a violent and sexually rapacious virago: she bedded the pathetic evangelist Big Stoop (before Tim) and the dangerous Acting Chief Regency (after Tim). But there is class consciousness at work, too, and throughout the film's narrative. Tim, son of the Irish working class, has no business at Philips Exeter Academy, and that is in the end the reason he fails there, lacking the socialization to function effectively and morally above the working class into which he was born. Jessica and Patty, whose class origins are humble and who rise by means of sexual manipulation and prostitution, are the kind of working class heroines whose success ironizes conventional notions of the American Dream. They are failed Jay Gatsbys: imposters and American originals adrift not in F. Scott Fitzgerald's East Egg but in Norman Mailer's Provincetown.

As to psychopathology itself, there is plainly a degree of mental derangement in numerous of the film's characters: Tim Madden's alcoholism and divided view of himself, Jessica Pond's sexual compulsions, Wardley Meeks's and Lonnie Pangborn's homosexual frustration and neurosis, and Alvin Regency's dark satyriasis and murderous personality (he claims later in the film that his own duality consists of "Enforcer" and "Maniac"). The specific sort of psychopathology that Mailer likely has in mind in *Tough Guys*, though, is the sort of broadly distributed American psychopathology that he describes in other writings as having been the social effect of life in post-Second World War modernity, which he saw as having been profoundly damaged by revelations about the Holocaust, the developments in nuclear weapons, the erosion of conventional gender roles, and persistent conflict in the matter of race relations.

In his controversial essay "The White Negro," published in *Dissent* magazine in 1957, Mailer cited the psychologist Robert Lindner in order to define what he had in mind about the rise of cultural psychopathology in America:

The psychopath is a rebel without a cause, an agitator without a slogan, a revolutionary without a program: in other words, his rebelliousness is aimed to achieve goals satisfactory to himself alone; he is incapable of exertions for the sake of others. All his efforts, hidden under no matter what disguise, represent investments designed to satisfy his immediate wishes and desires. . . . The psychopath, like the child, cannot delay the pleasures of gratification; and this trait is one of his underlying, universal characteristics.

Seen in the light of these ideas about the need for psychopaths to fulfill desires in a childlike way, Mailer's world of vice and criminality in *Tough Guys* becomes easier to understand. His representations in the film adaptation of course conform to the genre conventions for the hard-boiled detective story or the true crime exploitation film, but there is also a serious dimension to Mailer's philosophy that the film confronts at various points.

Lest we think that Mailer has in mind only isolated cases of psychopathology in America, or that we begin to see Provincetown as an exceptional, pathological outpost aloof from an otherwise placid middle American flyover country, he makes entirely clear in "The White Negro" his view that the tendency in the direction of dangerous new mentalities is pervasive nationwide and culture-deep: it extends even to the world of modern cinema, that most democratic of all the contemporary arts:

[T]he psychopath may indeed be the perverted and dangerous front-runner of a new kind of personality which could become the central expression of human nature before the twentieth century is over. For the psychopath is better adapted to dominate those mutually contradictory inhibitions upon violence and love which civilization has exacted of us, and if it be remembered that not every psychopath is an extreme case, and that the condition of psychopathy is present in a host of people including many politicians, professional soldiers, newspaper columnists, entertainers, artists, jazz musicians, call-girls, promiscuous homosexuals and half the executives of Hollywood, television, and advertising, it can be seen that there are aspects of psychopathy which already exert considerable cultural influence.

The events—sexual, criminal, narcotic, violent—narrated in *Tough Guys* exude a kind of antic madness, and Mailer reinforces the theme of abnormal psychology as a kind of recurrent cultural problem that the film attempts to frame. Wardley Meeks, he of the unsteady sexual identity but possessing a sure and practiced hand with firearms (he kills Patty as well as the local criminals Stoodie and Spider), takes a moment to reflect on this sort of cultural psychopathology during his final conversation with Tim Madden. As so often in *Tough Guys*, Wardley—perhaps the most troubled, greedy, and debased character of them all—demonstrated the intellect to provide a clear vision about the ironies and perversities of the cultural situation that he inhabits. For instance, when he learns that a glitzy modern hotel has been built on the precise spot where the colonial Pilgrims first arrived at Provincetown, he remarks to Tim that: "Only a country as mad as ours could be such a roaring success."

Tough Guys may have failed to garner the support of contemporary critics, but its influence can be traced through subsequent decades of cinematic history. We can see echoes of Mailer's character complexity and baroquely philosophical dialogue in the recently produced *True Detective* cable series, starring Matthew McConaughey and Woody Harrelson. As in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, there is a blurry and ever-shifting line between the investigators themselves and the criminals they are investigating. The first *True Detective* (set in the bayous, slums, and cheap

suburbs of Louisiana) follows *Tough Guys* in selecting a settings and landscapes near a crucial historical boundary for American geopolitics. Whereas *Tough Guys* relies on, or at least implies, connections between colonial settlement of Cape Cod, the landing site for the English Pilgrims who later went on to establish a permanent community near Plymouth Rock in Massachusetts, *True Detective* follows the ironic present built upon Louisiana's vexed history of commercial exploitation, piracy, vice, slave trading, and colonial struggle.

It is also worth pointing some key antecedents in American cinema in the years leading up to Mailer's novel and subsequent film adaptation for *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. Above all in the crime genre, the 1970s were marked by the landmark success of Francis Ford Coppola's first two *The Godfather* films (1972/1974), based on the best-selling 1969 novel by Mario Puzo. Puzo's story of Italian immigrants building a mafia crime empire out of modest beginnings in New York City slums. Here as never before, and thanks especially to Coppola's brilliant direction along with defining performances by lead and supporting actors including Marlon Brando, Al Pacino, Diane Keaton, Robert Duvall, James Caan, and John Cazale, Puzo's story of the Corleone crime syndicate transcended the conventional limits. As with the later hit series *The Sopranos* on HBO, *The Godfather* used Italian family life and its criminal past to weave a powerful narrative showing a strong correlation between American success and American criminality, all with roots in ethnic identity. The Italian-ness of *The Sopranos* and *The Godfather*, made legible through immigrant foodways (Vito Corleone starts his crime fronting as an olive oil merchant), insular family ties of blood and patriarchal succession, and the sacramentality of Italian Catholicism shows a different mode in which Fitzgerald's *Gatsby* could be adapted to illustrate a different kind of American criminality as prototypical success story. In *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, the olive oil merchant is replaced by the worldly wise Irish American voice of Dougy Madden (Lawrence Tierney), hard-boiled longshoreman, relentless hard drinker, and unsentimental father to protagonist Tim Madden. Deracinated of his father's Irish toughness and resolve, the younger Madden has—like many Irish Catholics who came of age in the decades after the Second World War—abandoned religion and made some vague attempts at the writing life (in the *Tough Guys* novel, Tim is at work on a manuscript called “In Our Wild: Studies among the Sane”), but only after a failed prep school career as a blue-collar Catholic interloper at Exeter, a citadel of WASP cultural power. Perhaps it is not surprising that Francis Ford Coppola served as an executive producer for *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, which he may have seen as a variant on the Italian crime franchise that he'd done so much to develop.

Produced 18 years after the financial disaster of his previous film, the infamous *Maidstone* (1970), *Tough Guys* had the advantage of a \$5 million dollar budget and access to talented actors like Ryan O'Neal and Isabella Rossellini. Even their talent and professionalism though were not enough to make up for the film's weaknesses. Some of these weaknesses were undoubtedly the product of Mailer's inexperience at working a larger budget and its accompanying higher expectations for expert staging and plausible character development. But the film's departure from standards of cinematic craft are also related to artistic preferences that Mailer brought to the making of films. Interviewed in 2007 during a retrospective showing of his films, Mailer emphasized his artistic preferences (most visible in his earlier films) for improvisation, loosely scripted or unscripted scenes, and what he called “confidence over preparation” applied to “cock-eyed scenarios.”⁵ Still, the professionalism of the better-paid actors and John Bailey's evocative cinematography impressed many reviewers who had seen Mailer's early films, which had been eccentric, highly improvised, and semi-professional at best. For Vincent Canby, reviewing *Tough Guys* for the *New York Times*, the film's appeal lay not in its production values, which he criticized



Figure 16.3 Ryan O'Neal (Tim Madden) and Clarence Williams III (Bolo) in a scene cut from *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987). Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

for “boldly embraced implausibilities” and “narrative confusion.” Instead, Canby pointed to “those political and social meanings that Mr. Mailer may read into [*Tough Guys*] but that remain invisible to the rest of us.”⁶ What is curious about Canby’s remark is that he apparently has detected those “political and social meanings” in *Tough Guys*, but he’s not entirely clear about how to interpret them.

The Puritans who made their first landfall at Provincetown before settling near Plymouth Rock in 1620 imagined their American outpost as godly and virtuous, or as what the great Puritan leader John Winthrop, who settled across the bay from Provincetown, described as a “city on a hill” whose righteous adherence to Christian values would be a powerful example of collective morality triumphing over selfishness and worldly pleasures. A long-time summer resident of Provincetown, Norman Mailer himself was acutely aware of both the town’s historic significance and the hedonistic reputation it developed during the twentieth century. By contrast with its Puritan heritage, Mailer’s Provincetown, in many respects like the Parris Island boot camp of *Full Metal Jacket* or the New Orleans of *True Detective* or the Las Vegas of *The Godfather: Part II*—figures as a landscape for surveying America’s surreal, absurd, and criminal unconscious. Standing for everything non-puritanical, it is an emblem for a nation whose historical arc bends away from godly virtue and toward the worldly pleasures of narcotics and alcohol, homosexuality, pornography, voyeurism, murder, and adultery. Tim Madden, the film’s American everyman, follows the trail of crime in typical whodunit fashion but eventually discovers (after his temporary amnesia from alcohol blackout) that he is no crusading agent for justice but merely an accessory to misbehavior, irrationality, and crime. Indeed, the primary justice official of the story is Provincetown’s Acting Chief of Police, Alvin Regency, whom we discover eventually to be a weed-smoking murderer with a history of Vietnam

military atrocities. Even Dougy Madden, Tim Madden's father, educated on the mean streets and the waterfront docks, turns away from conventional justice by expertly submerging the severed heads of two murder victims, as though it were all in day's work for the practiced hands of an American lawman.

In the 1984 *Tough Guys* novel, Mailer appears at various points to emphasize the specifically American-ness of this blend of criminality and justice-seeking, a duality exemplified especially by Dougy and Tim Madden, who are neither law-abiding nor lacking in certain instincts toward the right. By contrast the film adaptation seems, perhaps of necessity, because of the film's inherently less discursive qualities, which are somewhat less explicit than the *Tough Guys* novel in articulating the ideas about human nature that Mailer had been exploring in many of his earlier fiction as well as in his earlier films, and there is somewhat less emphasis in the *Tough Guys* film on the story's efforts to illustrate distinctly American cultural problems in the wake of the 1960s social revolutions. Still, there are traces in the film of the novel's attempt to situate the murder mystery squarely in the context of American myth alongside its purported cultural decadence, as when Wardley Meeks tells Tim Madden that he misses Patty Lareine not so much for her companionship but instead for her ability to "throw the greatest parties this Republic has ever seen." In this sense, the two serve as cultural types and symbols for Mailer, who for decades had written extensively and probingly about the meanings of American identity and politics. Patty the gold-digging, oversexed Southern Belle and Wardley the hedonistic but closeted Wasp homosexual thus stand in Mailer's film as representatives of two conspiring forces in the American republic's decline, and they collide at Provincetown, the geographic site of the new nation's centuries-old beginning.

So it is that Tim Madden, the thwarted Irish-American pretender to the upper classes, finds himself instead with the hillbilly sexual athlete Patty Lareine (Wardley calls her an "unredeemed redneck"), whose pornographic sensibility is such that she once admitted that "My pussy hair was bright gold in high school, until I went out and scorched it with the football team." Her blunt sexual talk is matched by other characters as well, including the cream-suited dandy and faded aristocrat Wardley Meeks, who in one final effort to seduce Tim Madden offhandedly asks him about the heterosexual intimacies between Tim and Patty Lareine: "She ever give you a rim job?" Whether talk like this is seen as adventurous frankness or mere pandering vulgarity, outside of the avowedly pornographic realm who else in 1987 Hollywood was creating this kind of sexually charged dialogue? This is dialogue that serves as a homosexual counterpoint to Acting Chief Regency's accusation about Tim Madden, spoken in drunken conversation with Dougy Madden: "Your son [Tim] put Madeleine in orgies. And your son cracked her up in a car and destroyed the womb." In his commentary on sexuality, we see discern in Mailer's curious blend of iconoclasm and traditionalism with respect to cultural and sexual mores. On the surface, Mailer is a heedless documentarian of the sexual revolution, about which his characters speak in the most blunt and vulgar terms. Embarrassment and prudery get no traction in *Tough Guys*. Instead, the sexual revolution according to the formulations Mailer presents in *Tough Guys* appears to eventuate in women's promiscuity (e.g. nymphomania for Madeleine, Patty, Jessica) and male criminality and decadence (e.g. drug-dealing, alcoholism, and promiscuity for Tim; homosexuality and murder for Wardley, drug abuse, promiscuity, and murder for Regency).

We know from Mailer's *Tough Guys* novel of 1984 that the story was deeply engaged with the pornographic sensibilities written across middle America in the 1980s, the golden age of inexpensive VHS recording and domestication of sexually explicit cinema (amateur or professional). In the novel, there are added complications to the adultery story upon which the film focuses, and they are complications that show how ambivalent Mailer's characters can be with respect to the new



Figure 16.4 Patty Lareine (Debra Sandlund) and Jessica Pond (Frances Fisher) in *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

sexual license and permissiveness of the 1980s. At one point during their relationship, Tim's lover Madeleine discovers his trove of sexually explicit Polaroid photos featuring his sometime lover, Patty Lareine. Stunned at the notion of another woman posing nude for the camera of her own lover, Madeleine bitterly confronts him, apparently oblivious to the irony of her complaint: "They're of Patty Lareine. They're nude. They're obscene." Even more revealingly, she continues that "[t]hey're worse than the ones you took of me. I don't know if I can bear it." This scene is of course analogous to the film's portrayal of Tim Madden's devastation upon learning of his wife's infidelity, a devastation that of course is not deserved when we consider his own marital infidelities and transgressions. If ever vice and punishment were in balance for American culture, Mailer's comic-gothic-horror-existential-transgressive exercise shows that the pleasure-seeking classes of 1980s America are witness to and participants in a disorienting reconfiguration of values. The film's absurdity and melodrama are out of step with the well-oiled aesthetic of big-budget Hollywood productions, but they are perfectly suited to Mailer's sense, in both novel and cinematic iteration of *Tough Guys*, that Provincetown in winter is theater enough for observing a world gone wrong.

Provincetown's deserved reputation as hedonistic summer fantasia for homosexual tourists and residents is perhaps the central undercurrent of both novel and film, for we learn of Tim Madden that as a youth he's been expelled (along with Wardley Meeks) from Philips Exeter Academy for reasons that are not specified. Later, during Wardley's failed attempt to seduce him at gunpoint, Tim remarks "I [remember] your crying, the day we got kicked out of Exeter together." But what is specified very clearly from the outset of the film is not only the super-heated sexual demimonde that Tim experiences in Provincetown and points South but also the ambivalence of his very sexual identity. In an early conversation with his father, Dougy Madden, who comes to visit soon after Tim's five-day drug and alcohol bender that initiated a sequence of events leading to multiple

murders, we learn Dougy's views of both marriage and sexuality. Mentally tough enough to have foresworn his own cancer medications because of their nauseating side effects, Dougy sets the existential tone of the film by considering his experience of terminal illness: "The spirits circle around my bed and tell me to dance. I tell them 'tough guys don't dance.'" Delivering more hard advice, Dougy reflects about Tim's tempestuous relationship with Patty Lareine that "A guy who marries a rich dame deserves everything he gets." To this comment, Tim responds "You always warned I'd turn out queer." For tough guys, then, matters of life and death can be confronted directly, but in *Tough Guys Don't Dance* "turning out queer" is a constant source of anxiety, in much the same way that death is a persistent anxiety (and reality), and it is a major factor leading to the suicide of Tim Madden's prep school companion, the murderous and homosexual Wardley Meeks.

Sexual politics dominate the film in other ways as well. We have learned from Acting Chief of Police Regency that Tim Madden's former love, Madeleine (Isabella Rossellini), has been made sterile because of injuries suffered in a motoring accident while Tim Madden was at the wheel. The Madden family's anxieties about Tim's incipient homosexuality are thus put into tension with the heterosexual braggadocio of Acting Chief of Police, Alvin Regency, who despite his virility persists in a marriage which he knows will lead to no enlargement of his family. To state the obvious: children are entirely absent from both the film and novel version of *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, which presents a sordid world of adult pleasure-seeking and murderous criminality. It is a nihilistic vision in which the narcissism and hedonistic license of post-1960s American culture appears to turn in on itself, vanquishing its key players along the way. The film is clear enough on these points that Mailer's interview comments that accompany the DVD edition of the film seem either disingenuous or perhaps ironic: "I felt most horror films are over the top, always. I wanted to show that horror is really in the mind when it encounters elements it can't quite dominate. That's what I wanted for the film: a subtle kind of horror." Given Mailer's remarks about subtlety and horror, it is striking indeed that his version of the subtle horror of American culture highlights the criminal structure of the national consciousness: the decadence, lust, vulgarity, violence, and rapaciousness that characterize the people to whom the Pilgrims had bequeathed a new nation and a high-minded civilization.

Notes

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- 2 Kennedy, Eugene (1984), "The Essential Mailer" in *Conversations with Norman Mailer*, J. Michael Lennon (ed.) Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1988: 331–2. Original published in *Sunday: The Chicago Tribune Magazine*, September 9, 1984: 23–5, 28–9.
- 3 See http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/longterm/movies/videos/toughguysdontdancerhinson_a0c934.htm (accessed: March 10, 2017).
- 4 Mailer, Norman (2003), "Norman Mailer in Provincetown" on *Tough Guys Don't Dance* [Film] DVD Supplement, MGM.
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- 6 Canby, Vincent (1987), "Review of *Tough Guys Don't Dance*," in *The New York Times*, December 18. Available online: <http://www.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9B0DE4DC163CF93BA2575AC0A961948260> (accessed: November 12, 2014).

PARADISE LOST: NORMAN MAILER AND AMERICAN PURGATORY

David Masciotra

"My car went into a severe skid," Harry Hubbard, the protagonist of Norman Mailer's epic CIA novel, *Harlot's Ghost*, remembers. "The wall of forest on one side stuttered up to me," he explains. Unable to gain control of the vehicle, but desperately trying to pull the mechanical beast back into safety, he finds himself rushing toward the far shoulder where "the other wall of pines" awaits him. "I thought for a moment I had died and become a devil," but then without rational explanation, "the road began to resolve."¹

In an earthly prayer of mystery and maniacal certainty, he recites—"actually aloud to the empty car"—John Milton's words in *Paradise Lost*: "Millions of creatures walk the earth unseen, both when we wake and when we sleep."

Robert Barron, a Catholic priest and writer, explains that in the modern world, the solitary car experience is one of our last remaining monastic moments. The radio and the phone promise relief from self-scrutiny and aimless introspection, but the enclosed space, especially in an American car culture, transports the mythic possibility of spiritual travel, in addition to the physical reality of bodily movement. Hubbard found himself, while enveloped in his monastic space, caught between two sides of the highway; two forests of darkness and dread where one collides not only with mortality, but perhaps something spectral; something inexplicable. By some miraculous intervention, the car straightens, and Hubbard is able to repossess the stability of down the middle mobility. Orientation in the center—that place between two poles—is only as stable as perception will allow, however. *Harlot's Ghost* examines how every man is really two men, and that the struggle for identity is an ongoing negotiation between not two sides of a personality, but two actual personalities.

Norman Mailer spent his life—on the page and the screen—in that car with Harry Hubbard, forever skidding from one side of the highway to the other, exploring the murky and muddy blur between good and evil, God and the devil, heaven and hell. In Mailer's existentialism, he advocated extremity. William F. Buckley once expressed confusion over Mailer's statement that, "The world is better off if every so-called type in the world is better. It's a better world when the cops get better and the criminals get better."

Just as Christ said that he could swallow what was hot or cold, but that he would spit out the lukewarm, the in between state of stasis is what seemed to most terrify, but also fascinate Mailer.

It is in such a state that one can gather the courage to break out of the dull and into the spiritually, physically, and psychically pyrotechnic.

Catholic theology has a name for such a condition—for such a place, even—purgatory. It is a place or condition, according to Catholicism, meant to purify. It is “temporal punishment for those who, departing this life in God’s grace, are, not entirely free from venial faults, or have not fully paid the satisfaction due to their transgressions.” Mailer’s characters live in purgatory. Their settings are often claustrophobic, and their condition is often punitive. It is courage that acts as key to freedom; where they are free to become good or evil—the better cop or the better criminal. Mysticism and mystery always have folded fingers over the steering wheel of Mailer’s writing, what he called “the spooky art.” For his ultimate setting, he deeply inspected and investigated the spookiest of all scenes—the United States of America—specifically what Greil Marcus, citing Woody Guthrie, Howlin’ Wolf, southern tent revivals, slave spirituals, and voodoo spells—called the “old, weird America.”

“I’ve always felt that my relationship with America is analogous to a marriage. I love this country. I hate it,” Mailer once said. Caught between two extremes, he explores a land of contradictions, but more importantly, a land of transgressions. President Reagan, invoking the Bible, likened America to a “shining city on a hill.” Before it can become heaven, however, it must purify itself—a process that it routinely refuses.

“Most of the country believes in Jesus Christ,” Mailer explained. “And they believe compassion is the greatest virtue. But we only believe this on Sundays. And the other six days of the week, we’re an immensely competitive nation. We scramble like hell to make more money than our neighbor. . . . There’s a great guilt in American life, and this guilt is that we’re not good Christians.”

Americans know that the veniality of their lifestyle obstructs their spiritual skid into one side of the highway or the other, and while they might feel confident that they are not the “great infidel” of Islamic terrorist accusations, they also must, even if they are loathe to admit it, know that they are not the shining city on the hill. America is purgatory.

The America Mailer maps with his acumen and imagination, from the director’s chair and the novelist’s vantage point, is one where demons and angels slug shots of bourbon, make love, and discuss war together. The duality is not apparent. One is forever caught and lost in a swirl of good and evil, always amiss and at a loss to determine which side is winning and which side one is serving. Mailer himself, in his existential novelist school of theology, once posited, with prayer-like intensity and solemnity, that no person can ever have confidence that he is serving the devil or God. Just when you think you are on God’s side, you are doing the devil’s bidding. But when you fear you are assisting the devil, you might actually operate under command of the Lord. This is equally true for institutions as it is for individuals. In *Of a Fire On The Moon*, Mailer continually wonders if the NASA moon landing is good or evil. Is it in accordance with the devil’s plan or the divine will?

Mailer theology believes that neither God nor the Devil is all powerful or all present. God is simply “doing the best he can” but so is the Devil. The two supernatural powerhouses are locked in battle; forever tabulating every lost soul and victorious battle in a casualty count in an eternal, cosmic war. The battleground is earth, and naturally, the stakes are highest where the most power—and the most technology (what Mailer considered the devil’s greatest tool and temptation)—reside.

America is an ever expansive frontier. If conquerors and capitalists could not capture new territory, they would capture new markets. When Manifest Destiny could no longer justify colonial dominance, historian Morris Berman argues, America expanded with technology. The devil’s



Figure 17.1 Norman Mailer directs actress Frances Fisher in the living room of his home at 627 Commercial Street in Provincetown in *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987). Photo courtesy of Adam Bartos.

toolbox equipped America to plant its flag on the moon, spread itself around the world, and become what Gore Vidal, Mailer's famous friend and feud, called "the last empire."

Shortly after Mailer's death in 2007, a radio journalist asked Vidal to name his favorite Mailer novel. "*Barbary Shore*," Vidal shot back without hesitation. Mailer's second novel received the worst reviews of his entire career. Perhaps, critics were unable to fit themselves into the claustrophobic container of the novel's setting. It is as if Mailer has taken the entire frontier of American life and, with a magical literary crowbar, jammed it into one small, boarding house in Brooklyn. *Barbary Shore* is Mailer's application of the Jean-Paul Sartre insight, "hell is other people." Just as Sartre presented his misanthropic philosophy in the play, appropriately called, *No Exit*, Mailer puts his characters into a world in which there is seemingly no escape—a world that is at once minute and massive. Sartre was an atheist, and his rejection of the supernatural, would later cause Mailer to curse him as the man most responsible for the "derailment of existentialism."

Existentialism must involve the divine—the superb sharing of experience with a higher truth and deeper meaning. Sartre invents an afterlife resembling the waiting room of a psychiatric office. As an atheist, Sartre would claim his world in which the suffering, large and small, that humans can inflict on one another is entirely fictive, in its lack of factuality, but true, in its metaphorical meaning.

In *Barbary Shore*, Michael Lovett, a Second World War veteran suffering from amnesia settles into a Brooklyn boarding house. He remembers little before his arrival, and at no point in the book, do readers find him outside his new home. It is as if his world is entirely contained. There is no physical mobility, and his intellect is entrapped by his condition, rendering him unable to hardly imagine anything outside his residency in purgatory. The mystery and ephemerality of his experience takes on spiritual stakes, cosmically eclipsing the terrestrial terrain of Sartre. Marxism seems to offer escape to Lovett. He must summon courage to cultivate solidarity, but he faces the challenge of questioning who is worthy of solidarity or even sympathy? His tormentors—the other tenants of the building—are all so odd, depraved, or in some cases, even sadistic, that it is a true stretch to contemplate anything other than retreat. The fact that Lovett seems stuck, without mobility of mind or body, emphasizes the frustration of the American experience. In what is Mailer's most political novel, he seems to argue that we are all locked here for a while. We live in purgatory. If we want to break free, we must find the courage to seek salvation that is communal, rather than individualistic. Hank Williams sang, "No one gets out of this world alive." Mailer is singing that no one gets out of purgatory alone. With a little help from Marx, he demonstrates how our redemptions are all interlinked.

Lovett lives in a cage, unable to actualize agency and find freedom. Contrary to the American myth of rugged individualism, he is a man in a trap. His purgatory is his cell—a cell taking on the form of a boarding house in the cultural capital of the world, and the central junction box of America's economic power. In the same city, another Mailer man navigates the American myth in a full-blooded, engorged, and possibly entranced, fight for freedom. Stephen Rojack, a war hero and former Congressman, is lost in the purgatory of his own perverse and bizarre manifestation of, as the novel's title suggests, *An American Dream*.

The novelist James Lee Burke once said that "Americans claim to live in a Christian nation. They claim to admire Jesus Christ, Martin Luther King, and St. Francis of Assisi, but the truth is otherwise." America's public policy exposes the hypocrisy of its piety. The "American dream" is a vision of freedom inseparable from crass consumption. Many Americans deceive themselves into believing that they reside in heaven on earth, but in a search for paradise, they've settled for bite after bite of Eden's apple. The determination of the dream is a translation into perpetual hustling, and the pressures of capitalism, in order to maintain maximum hustling, impose pressures on the

free individual. The free individual conforms and quickly learns his role, rather than shapes his identity. As Mailer once said, "In America, if you want to remain successful, you have to bow to all the right people in the right places."

Rojack, following the mysterious direction of the moon, decides he will no longer bow. He will attempt to break the chains of conformity that keep him imprisoned in purgatory. America promises freedom, fun, pleasure, and peace, but offers the substitute satisfactions of wealth and power. Purgatory follows the American wherever he travels, and if his confinement is not claustrophobic, as is the case with Lovett, then his spiritual state is stagnation; forever caught in between heaven and hell; forever lukewarm. In America, purgatory lives in the soul, and therefore, the soul swims in purgatory.

"The White Negro" is Mailer's understanding of the purgatory escapee in American life. Black Americans, having lived in hell for so long, discover the secret of heaven. Forcibly cast outside the mainstream of conformity, anxiety, and hypocrisy—purgatory—they are unable to access its financial and political benefits, but they are relieved of the burdens of middle class morality. The middle is that same central space of purgatorial lockdown. Jazz, a sonic ejaculation of energy, creatively captures the essence of existential freedom. It is also the aural equivalent of the "apocalyptic orgasm." Mailer referred to sexuality, and its distant, but real promise of "the apocalyptic orgasm" as the ultimate experience of transformation. It is the life changing event. It is a moment in which one is able to feel—with the most intense physicality and electric spirituality—the escape hatch open, and the apocalyptic orgasm allows for one to fall through that opening. Freedom is accessible and palpable.

Rojack has an apocalyptic orgasm with his maid. Soon after following instruction from the moon, he seduces her and feels he is "shaking hands with the devil" when she begins to cum. His ejaculation brings with it a vision of a celestial city. "Murder is never unsexual," Rojack states, and his "bitch of a brawl" with the maid, comes right after he kills his wife, Deborah. While he strangles her, he has a "view of what was on the other side of the door." "Heaven was there."

Breaking out of purgatory has Rojack searching the neon nights of New York, meeting demonic characters, and one angel—Cherry, a jazz singer. The dream ends—or does it actually begin?—with the continuation of the search for the apocalyptic orgasm. Rojack drives west, making stops in Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, and Las Vegas. Rojack's turn toward psychopathy gives him an exit from purgatory. It is the construction of a "new nervous system" when the "nervous circuits of the past" become "inefficient and antiquated."

Receptivity at higher levels of sensitivity to the triumphantly absurd and eschatologically pleasurable equips Rojack with the courage and power to discover how dramatically his dream diverges from the American dilution of the dream. America offers purgatory, but he is willing to travel through hell, and reach for heaven, in his struggle for genuine freedom and agency.

America might exist as one vast land of spiritual purgatory, where inhabitants squirm to settle into the space between capitalism and Christianity, sex as sin and sex as paradise, and God and the Devil. If there is one institution that even the most unconscious Americans could recognize as purgatory—a purgatory within purgatory—it is prison. On Rojack's odyssey out west, he does not stop in Utah, but Mailer would have a significant stay there years after the publication of *An American Dream*. In *The Executioner's Song*, he would investigate the demonic psychopathy of Gary Gilmore. The ex-con spent years in prison, internalizing a lifestyle that is entirely antithetical to the demand for personal responsibility and self-sufficiency in America. He was unfit to live in Utah, even with the aid of his compassionate cousins and his passionate girlfriend, Nicole, but he might have also lacked the ability to live anywhere on Earth. His own sense of his own evil, and his own

failures of karma, led him to accept his sentence of death after he murdered two innocent people. Gilmore, according to Mailer, had genius and greatness within him, but he was also intimately acquainted with the demonic. If his creation of two corpses is not convincing evidence, one need only consult the woman who loved him, Nicole, and realize that even she felt an evil presence once when hugging him.

Mailer divides *The Executioner's Song* into two sections—Western Voices and Easter Voices. Utah, with Gilmore as usher, is an intersection for classes of America—from the desperately poor to the relatively rich—and the cultures of America—from the faithfully Mormon to the fatalistic media. In the open, desolate space of Utah, combative forces seem to also meet; wrestling over ownership of the American soul. Gilmore himself is a product of a cosmic conflict, once offering to Nicole, “I’m further away from God than I am the devil.”

Considering that purgatory, according to Catholic theology, is punishment for sinful behavior, and that its residents must cleanse themselves—purge themselves—of the stains on their spirit, before they can find communion with the creator, Gilmore’s measurement of proximity with the Devil, and distance from God, is an identification with purgatory. The big sky and the expansive emptiness of Utah make it a rich symbol for the nothingness that occupies the soul in such a state. America cannot claim its values, and it suffers in a void. Gilmore cannot function, because there is a demon taking the territory of his soul. Just as one cannot see the drama inherent in the Utah landscape, one can also easily miss the presence of the most dramatic actors on the air. “Crazy people are close to the spirits,” is another Gilmore insight. The psychopath of the White Negro, the psychopathic transformation of Rojack, and Gary Gilmore might all share a symbiosis with the



Figure 17.2 Wardley Meeks (John Bedford Lloyd) holds Tim Madden hostage in *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

spirits, and it is through that symbiosis that, for better (freedom) and for worse (murder), they are able to exit purgatory and enter something closer to the Devil or God. The apocalyptic orgasm does not destroy any world, as much as it ends the existence of purgatory within the soul.

When Gilmore is making love to Nicole, he experiences a nightmarish vision of torment. He feels as if he is in a "closed up space." If Gilmore's mind had visitation from a mere memory of his jail cell, it is likely he would have said so. Gilmore's vague description makes it seem that his soul was caught in a trap. It was, perhaps, his own vision of purgatory. The claustrophobia, the confinement, and the catastrophe of living in a space of emptiness; unable to truly access the good or the evil, but all the while, suffering under the suspicion that his proximity to the devil is much more observable and palpable than his relationship with God.

"When we feel dread, we may not be that far from purgatory," Mailer once remarked. "Something important could be taking place in our soul, but we don't know what."

One of the ignorant remarks people find pleasure in making is "the book is always better than the movie." It is more accurate to delineate the difference between two modes of storytelling. Taking instruction from Marshall McLuhan, that the medium is the message, it is clear that an audio/visual device of narrative differs, in strength and weakness, from a textual one. The film and novel both offer a story to the reader, but they offer a different experience of receiving and perceiving that story. Norman Mailer masterfully told the story of Gary Gilmore, and with it the spiritual story of America, in *The Executioner's Song*, the book, and *The Executioner's Song*, the film. Mailer wrote the screenplay, and his collaborator, Lawrence Schiller, directed the film. The prevailing mood of the movie is dread. The opening images of the desolate town in Utah, with Waylon Jennings' haunting voice providing the aural accompaniment, create a restless angst in the viewer. As the movie moves along, Tommy Lee Jones brilliantly portrays Gilmore becoming more unwound and more unsettling to those around him. The film has a nervous energy, resulting from Schiller's raw direction, and Mailer's perfect choices for inclusion and exclusion; performing the miracle of synthesizing a thousand page book into a two-hour film.

There is a crucial scene thirty-six minutes into the story. Gilmore has already begun to demonstrate that he is unable to control the demon buried beneath his breast. Tommy Lee Jones is appearing increasingly volatile and vicious, and with little provocation, he attacks one of his coworkers from behind. Nicole visits that coworker where he lives, in a small, metallic trailer touching the sky in the middle of nowhere. She persuades him not to press charges on Gary, even though he believes that eventually Gary will seriously hurt someone. His only request is that she fall to her knees, and help him send a message to heaven. They pray for Gary's soul—that God will give it rest and allow for the turmoil and turbulence to subside. The two bodies on their knees, in the doorway of a trailer, situated in the space of nothing, captures the struggle for the soul between God and the Devil. It is no longer Gary and Nicole who feel dread, but everyone who Gary touches with the presence of his life. "It's too late," Gary's uncle worries when speaking about any chance to help Gary, "he got burned inside."

There are mysterious forces in life that visit strangers and neighbors alike without mercy and without hesitation. Those who are burned inside, out of some morbid and perverse sense of spiritual survival, try to pour lighter fluid wherever they go, and enlarge the fire. Spiritual arson turns to real life murder, and *The Executioner's Song*—in book and film—but especially in the film as the viewer helplessly watches hell overcome Gilmore, and waits as he will bring that hell to others, brilliantly and bracingly depicts how evil can enter a spirit, and destroy lives. Gilmore's murder victims—a gas station attendant and motel clerk—had no preparation for the darkness that would descend on them. Mailer, in several interviews, proposed the theory that Gilmore might have

placed a target on them, instantly and intuitively on sight, because they both looked particularly Mormon. Perhaps, with his soul experiencing dread and feeling the weight of purgatory, his wickedness moved him to strike at the appearance of heaven—the clean, uncorrupt piety that so evaded him. If one feels closer to the devil than to God, one might also feel overwhelmed by the desire, even the demand, to introduce others to the executor of evil.

Evil, from the world of Chaucer to Tarantino, is often comical. Villains possess a charm and charisma that renders their destruction appealing. Humor is their art of persuasion. The psychopath, who is equally heroic and demonic in Mailer's world, cannot settle for residency in purgatory. In his attempt to break free, he develops courage and that courage will lead to either disaster or divinity. Rojack finds the divine with a taste and glimpse of the apocalyptic orgasm, but creates disaster when he murders his wife. "The White Negro" is at once seductive and scary because he is equally capable of violence and pleasure. Gilmore believed the love of Nicole could usher him into the sanctuary of salvation, but he was tragically and horrifically wrong. An understanding and appreciation of how America is purgatory, and the American, is always navigating and negotiating the purgatorial space between perdition and paradise, allows for recognition of shared humanity. On some level, every America is with Lovett in the Brooklyn boarding house.

Every American is also with a strange and surreal group of criminals and outlaws, hiding in a loft in Mailer's first film, *Wild 90*. A group of fugitives are holed up in a room, unable to exit for various vague reasons. The claustrophobia of purgatory is made worse by Mailer's character—a vulgar, drunken, but more important, demonic presence of a man. He is the comical devil—Lucifer with a court jester's hat. Early in the film, without reason or provocation, he starts punching a chair. His lunacy leads one of his cohorts to comment to another criminal on how uncomfortable he is sharing the loft with him. Like Sartre would understand, there is "no exit," and the pain of other people, especially one who is deranged and demon-like, offers no compromise, and no escape from purgatory. At the conclusion of the first part of the film, Mailer looks into a mirror. Seeing his facial expression, one is unsure whether to run out of the room in fright, or roll on the floor in laughter. His face encapsulates the marriage between terror and comedy. He looks evil and amusing.

Shortly after the second part begins, Mailer makes it clear that he is devil and creator. Norman Mailer, the man, often spoke of his belief that God is a creator, much like a novelist, some deity doing the best he can, but given to error. Mailer, as novelist and director, occupies that space on Earth. Without a kingdom from which to govern, he settles for making contribution to the American understanding of purgatory. "Action!" he yells to no one in particular in *Wild 90*.

Mailer once said that "film is like death." If film is like death, the player and director might experience some internal death before entering the world of film, where lights and cameras are walls and borders. The world that one enters into after the director shouts "action," is not actually reality, but at the same time, it is not entirely fictional. *Wild 90* had no script or blocking, but as Mailer's false accent reminds the viewers, it was not without invention. Film—caught between two worlds, Mailer seems to say—is a replication of purgatory.

How could one enter a film without experiencing any dread? The creator is responsible for an entire world. Doing the best he can, but given to error, his soul has to fluctuate between birth and death. When the camera and lights turn on, everyone enters this world of dread, and everyone experiences purgatory. Watching *Wild 90* is uncomfortable, much like watching *The Executioner's Song* is uncomfortable. For entirely different reasons, dread overtakes the viewer. The desire to escape—to find freedom beyond the claustrophobic confines of the cinematic purgatory—tempts the viewer to turn it off. Intellectual courage becomes a requirement for sticking with the story.

While watching, the viewer must purge himself of some fear or shortcoming. Many of the best films recreate the dread of purgatory, reacquaint the viewer with that unsettled world, and make the viewer work within his own spirit to find the courage to achieve reprieve and relief. By showing men caught in the same struggle, Mailer makes the existential combat of heaven, hell, and purgatory central to his visual storytelling.

Mailer's next film, more than anything else, reaffirms his statement of belief to William F. Buckley that America gets better when both the cops and the criminals get better. Like *Wild 90*, *Beyond the Law* had no screenplay, and very little pre-direction. Taking place entirely in one Manhattan precinct, and with Mailer playing another slightly deranged character, this time a Lieutenant, the movie transports viewers into the cloudy world of, what the *New York Times* called, "a purgatory for the downtrodden and dispossessed . . . misfits and madmen."

In Mailer's purgatory for cops and crooks, morality is always ambiguous, and double agent status of every participant—provocateur for the devil and defender of God—is always clear. "Salvation, for Mailer, is the broad road of official religion," literary critic Richard Levine wrote, "It is the mythical hero's trip through hell and the mystic's faith that 'the way up is the way down.' In the war between God and the Devil, great saints are great sinners, for one must learn the Devil's stratagems in order to do service for the Lord."

Norman Mailer once recalled sitting in a diner, and hearing a voice command him to leave without paying the bill. His middle class morality restrained him to his chair until finally he realized that the voice does not necessarily emanate from the Devil. It might very well come from God. God, Mailer thought, might have given him the lesson that he could never change the world, or incite a revolution of consciousness in the American public, if he did not have the courage to even leave a restaurant without paying for his meal.

The title of *Beyond the Law* is appropriate and evocative, because the role of those on the side of the law and those colliding against it are interchangeable. Looking beyond the law, there is ethical and spiritual combat—all taking place in the theater of purgatory, and all helping to tip the scales in favor of the Devil or God. "I've gone corrupt," Mailer's Lieutenant confesses near the end of the movie, "I love my country. I had to." Where better to learn the Devil's stratagems than in the country that claims to love God above all else, but actually worships technology, money, and its beaming image of itself?

The purgatory that is America takes on even grander and more frightening proportions because it never had much of a communal bond. Mailer might have felt an attraction to writing about the legal system—killers and cops—because it was an opportunity to explore class and societal connection in a culture without a social compact. Salvation is communal in *Barbary Shore*, but on the ground in the good old USA, every man, woman, and child is an isolated island. Everyone fights for himself; his identity, his money, his life. Mailer explained that *The Executioner's Song* navigates almost all the classes of America, save for the supremely rich and the desperately poor.

The pressure that results from a culture attempting to strip away the solidarity of human feeling and obligation is one of the many reasons why Mailer had a lifelong obsession with masculinity, and why his treatment of masculinity transcends the physical and emotional to touch the spiritual. Masculinity always exists at a proving ground where every man must constantly demonstrate his virility and vitality. What *The White Negro*, *Rojack*, and even *Gilmore*, in a perverse and deranged way, have in common is a resistance to anything that declaws or defangs their masculine power. Courage, communal salvation, and masculine aggression meet at the intersection where the soul most longs to silence its dread, and escape its purgatory.



Figure 17.3 Ryan O'Neal, Frances Fisher, and R. Patrick Sullivan at the Widow's Walk (Red Inn) in Provincetown in *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987). Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

In *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, Dougy—the father of protagonist, Tim Madden—tells his son that because he is dying of cancer the “spirits circle around my bed” every night. Their message is simple: “They tell me to dance.” Dougy snarls back, “Tough guys don't dance.” Those whose toughness is sufficient to the construction of character remain stationary while the world demands that they move. The world might come in the form in disaster, or even another person: “Certain dames ought to wear a T-shirt that says, ‘Hang around. I'll make a cocksucker out of ya.’”

The tough guy does not dance. If the world demands movement, and the feet don't react, the soul will soon experience dread. Making it through the dread is the only exit available.

Tough Guys Don't Dance is one of the quirkiest, but also deepest and most delightful films of recent history. A tremendous triumph for Mailer, it manages to simultaneously distill and enhance the story of the novel. Much like *An American Dream*, its status between reality and fantasy is blurry. It is a film noir, among other things, and Mailer explained that: “Every dream is a film noir, because every dream is utterly unsentimental.”

Mailer once admitted to having a nightmare that he woke up in his home, everything was the same as his lucid life, but he had the creeping suspicion that he committed a murder. Violence and sex are forever present in film noir, and they threaten or elevate every moment in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. To the film noir, sexuality and murder are as indispensable as the hammer and nails are to a carpenter. “Fucking is penetration. Murder is penetration. They're equal,” Mailer said. “Great fucking must touch on our murderous impulses,” he elaborated, because copulation is necessary for the construction of civilization. Murder, then, is the most uncivil crime. All of civilization is built on the moral principle and law prohibiting murder. Freud wrote that the suppression and sublimation of the murderous impulse, along with the sexual desires, allows for the existence of civilization, but also troubles each subject of civilization with anxiety, sorrow, and dissatisfaction. The line between

God and the Devil is so thin because they both make a promise with the same precision and appeal—the promise of getting shut of civilization's discontents, and finally finding real, deep satisfaction.

Tim Madden wakes one morning with a bad memory and a bad hangover. There is a tattoo on his arm that he doesn't remember getting, and blood soaking the seat of his car. He soon discovers the head of a blonde woman—possibly his wife, possibly the previous night's lay—buried beneath his marijuana patch in a nearby forest, and like Mailer's nightmare, he soon suffers the torment of wondering if he committed civilization's worst violation; if his long dormant impulse to kill erupted, and he is now guilty of murder. Madden marks the days since his wife left him with shaving cream on the mirror. It is almost as if he is paying penance in some sentence for crimes he carried out in this life, or in some previous incarnation. For 28 days he is trapped in a world of spiritual torment where demons haunt him, in both physical and spectral form, and angels awaken him to the possibility of liberation. Purgatory is Provincetown, Massachusetts, where Norman Mailer actually resided, and where Madden lives mostly off the fruits of his wife's inheritance. The small, coastal town's chief of police, Alvin Luther Regency is the devil personified. He is a macho maniac, constantly taunting and bullying Madden with his claims of superior virility, potency, and masculinity.

Like *The Executioner's Song*, *Tough Guys Don't Dance* has a scenic and pastoral opening. The overwhelming aesthetic quality of both movies is stillness. Entirely opposite of *Wild 90* and *Beyond the Law*, these films take place in vast and open spaces. While the low budget criminal movies emphasize the claustrophobic prison of the characters' settings, *The Executioner's Song* and *Tough Guys Don't Dance* use the seemingly limitless topography of Utah and Provincetown to contrast against the confinement of the protagonists' spirits.

Gary Gilmore feels he must kill to cleanse himself. Feeling distant from God, he suffers from an imperative to, perhaps, erase all trace of God's signature from his soul. Madden, operating with a different conscience and set of ethics, fears that if he did indeed kill, his soul will forever exist in a torturous void of purgatorial struggle. Madden searches for peace, and can hardly find it. A problematic aspect of his suffering is that his world is continually spiraling downward into some bizarre otherworldly status. The nature of the dialogue and characterization of *Tough Guys Don't Dance* is one of its most entertaining and enrapturing qualities. The audio and visual dynamics of film allow Mailer to more powerfully emphasize and dramatize the absurdity of his characters in *Tough Guys*. No one in the entire movie speaks as if he or she is a normal human being. If Madden isn't dreaming, just like if Rojack isn't dreaming, he is certainly suspended in some alternative reality. As Madden clocks his time in this weird world with shaving cream on a mirror, he expresses the feeling that he is "living with a foul spirit."

The foul spirit was with him the night previous to his realization that he may have murdered a woman. He picked up a pretty blonde in a bar and cuckolded her companion right in front of him. At his home, perhaps possessed by that spirit, he told the high society couple that he was "feeling deranged." "So deranged," he added, "That I want to fuck your wife in front of you." "Only if she doesn't object," the husband added. In one of the wittiest lines of American film, Madden replies, "Chivalry."

The foul spirit is always present as Madden deals with the torture of Regency, the threats on his life, and the pull his heart feels in different directions—all of which offer another test to prove his masculine strength. Almost all of the permutations of masculinity find representation in the film. Regency is at the extreme end of machismo, while the cuckolded husband, and one of the chief villains, Wardley Meeks, the rich ex-husband of Madden's wife, are dangerous because they try to compensate for their lack of masculine imposition.

Madden, with the help of his father, the representation of not only masculine virility but also virtue, as opposed to Regency's macho evil, eventually gathers clue after clue and is able to escape the existential threat of his own capability of murder. He is not guilty, and he is able to survive. On Day 28, near the end of the film, Madden wipes away the shaving cream from the mirror. He felt his sentence had expired, and his soul, no longer paralyzed with dread, could begin to roam free. The film ends by depicting Madden's reunion with his ex-wife Madeline, who had gone on to marry Regency. They enter a new home with heavenly surroundings. The house is adorned in white, and celestial lights enter in through the windows, illuminating the beauty of Isabella Rossellini. Madden appears ecstatic. He has finally escaped purgatory and found his heaven. The courage and masculine bravado he displayed and demonstrated by besting opponents in fist fights, and behaving with the Hemingway standard of grace under pressure, has earned him his place in paradise. "Love is a reward of courage," Mailer once offered. Madden has his reward, and breaking with the film noir tradition, *Tough Guys Don't Dance* has a superficially happy ending.

Just as the movie comes to a close—the dream ends?—Madden shuts the door on his new home, over the threshold where he carried his new bride, and his face turns to worry and trepidation. Ominous music begins to play, darkening the design of the Hollywood finish. As the door shuts, is Madden entering another purgatory? Just as the individual, forever susceptible to the shots and explosions of a cosmic battle, can never have certainty over his status as soldier in the army of the Lord, or courier for the devil, Madden will never have the comfort of knowing he has escaped purgatory, and that he is serving God. His happiness is under constant threat. Wherever he makes his home, the devil is always in the room. The soul is forever suspended over the pit of purgatory.

"Jesus had an incredibly radical message. He had a wonderful, simple message. It was that money is evil," Mailer once explained when reflecting on his decision to write a short and accessible novel about the Christian Messiah, *The Gospel According to the Son*. "For what is a man profited," Jesus asked his disciples, "If he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?"

America gained the whole world in the twentieth century, but it certainly lost its soul, if it ever had one. Despite its identification as a Christian nation, it rejected the radical, wonderful, and simple message of Christ. It became obsessed with money, and obsequious to moneyed corporations.

One in ten Americans now take antidepressants. In 2014, America's suicide rate hit its highest point in 25 years. The American Sociological Association reports that the number of close friends that Americans claim to have continues to decline, while larger numbers of Americans self-medicate with the cheap sedatives of alcoholism, drug addiction, compulsive gambling, and habitual consumption of pornography. Americans are dealing with a devastating dosage of dread. It is as if the devil has assigned each American an intravenous supply of the spiritual poison, and the feed never stops. But how did it get there? How did America find a vein and unfold its collective arm?

Contrary to most American analyses of psychological pathologies, which tend to focus on individuals as atomized entities, rather than as members of a society, any reasonable conclusion must focus on the collective abandonment of the soul. One of Mailer's aspirations was to perform a synthesis of Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx. The discontents of American civilization are, at least partially, the result of its capitalistic nightmare; its fixation with financial triumph, and its transformation of nearly everything else into rubble and ruins.

Norman Mailer, as he would have it, becomes something of an odd and mad apostle, prophesying America's paralysis in purgatory. Until it dealt with the source of its dread, instead of simply trying to soften its symptoms, America would never escape its eternal torment. The American soul lingers like a foul odor in the loft with the boys of *Wild 90*. It is in the gas



Figure 17.4 Norman Mailer suffering in existential purgatory in *Wild 90* (1968). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

station with Gary Gilmore. It is on the ledge with Rojack. It is in the nostrils of the nightmare of Tim Madden.

Norman Mailer is now one of the many spirits drifting around the American bedside. His phantom voice continues to call for courage from the dusty pages of his books, and through the speakers of television sets where his movies play. The spirit looks America in the eye, and curls its finger. It might whisper a command to leave a diner without paying the bill, or it might promise redemption as a reward for the courage to overcome greed and selfish avarice. Purgatory is only permanent if its prisoners refuse to purge themselves of the sins that landed them there. In a devilish twist of fate, Mailer and his rogue's gallery of hipsters, maniacs, and libidinous tricksters, offer the one way out.

Note

- 1 Norman Mailer (1991), *Harlot's Ghost*, London: Random House: 437.



Figure 18.1 Ryan O'Neal and Hollywood Di Russo during the filming of *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987). Photo courtesy of Bonnie Barber.

18

TOUGH GUYS DON'T DANCE AND THE CINEMA OF REAGANISM

Scott Duguid

Some day, I'm going to run for President.

ALVIN LUTHER REGENCY

Tough Guys Don't Dance (1987) is a pulpy drama of hedonistic excess and murder which is also a film about America in the 1980s.¹ An adaptation of Norman Mailer's own 1984 neo-noir novel, the movie is the author's only adventure in narrative cinema, coming almost twenty years after his series of improvised avant-garde films, *Wild 90* (1968), *Beyond the Law* (1968) and *Maidstone* (1970). The film received dreadful reviews at the time, but has since become a cult classic, not least because of some infamously campy dialogue, including the Internet's semi-official "worst line reading ever." The "Oh God! Oh man!" scene, which caused a personal rift between Mailer and Ryan O'Neal, has at the time of writing received several million views on YouTube.² Contributing to the camp value is a highly 1980s trash aesthetics: postmodern neo-noir cinema mixed with elements of Stephen King horror and minimal touches of soft porn and violence. But like its source novel, *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, the movie is also politically a work of the 1980s. The film is at one level of reading a satire of the machismo and acquisitiveness of the Reagan era and its twin backlashes against feminism and the 1960s. Money, drugs and real estate—Santa Barbara and Palm Beach values—are primary motives here. But the political heart of this drama of decapitated heads in the marijuana patch is revenge.

The film is set at some distance from the heartlands of Reagan's America. The movie is an atmospherically shot love letter to Provincetown, Massachusetts, which along with Brooklyn Heights was Mailer's home for most of his writing life. The town is famous for its fishing and whaling, but is also known as a home for artists, bohemians, and a large summer gay population. In a nod to this bohemian history, the movie is haunted by the ghosts of two murdered Provincetown whores, who are literally invoked in the movie's high camp séance. The murderous and orgiastic forces of American history are at work in this landscape (as the film acknowledges, the original Pilgrim Fathers first landed on Provincetown before arriving at Plymouth Rock). Mailer affectionately thought of Provincetown as the "Wild West of the East,"³ and as well as its obvious tribute to noir, the film's cast of outlaws, high class carpetbaggers and crooked police chiefs do place it as a kind of Western. The film also, ideologically as much as geographically, pits East against West, bohemia against manifest destiny.

The basic frame story is straightforward. Tim Madden (Ryan O'Neal), a Provincetown writer and barman, is on a 24-day alcoholic binge after being left by his wife Patty Lareine (Debra Sandlund). The breakdown in Madden's personal life is reflected in the isolation of the Provincetown winter. Madden's solitary drinking is interrupted by the arrival of two California strangers, an ex-porn star Jessica Pond (Frances Fisher) and her partner Lonnie Pangborn (R. Patrick Sullivan). In the night of heavy drinking that follows, Madden and Pond have sex in front of Pangborn, but crucially for the plot Madden remembers very little else of the evening. The next morning Madden rises with a hangover, a fresh tattoo with the name of an ex named Madeleine (a Proustian touch), and little recollection of the night's events. He has also found blood on his clothes and the front seat of his car. Receiving a tip off from the new chief of police Alvin Luther Regency (a fabulously over-the-top Wings Hauser), Madden goes to check his marijuana stash in the woods of nearby Truro. There he finds a decapitated blonde female head. It is, however, uncertain whether it belongs to his wife or Jessica Pond, or if Madden himself is the killer. The movie's central mystery is driven as much by Madden's repressed guilt and murderous impulses as by the conventional lines of inquiry of detective fiction. Even when Madden becomes assured of his literal innocence, his behavior continues to be determined not only by the plotting of others but by anxieties about his own masculine identity.

Tough Guys Don't Dance is a movie that has bad taste fun with Mailer's own macho image and reputation as a scourge of feminist critics. Yet while it has its provocations, the movie is also a morality play about misogynistic violence. As an exploration of masculinity, *Tough Guys Don't Dance* examines the seriocomic potential of maleness, balancing an affectionate wry nostalgia for macho excesses with a forensic comprehension of masculinity's toxicity and violence. The title comes from an anecdote about the mobster Frank Costello that Mailer heard from his friend the boxer Roger Donoghue, and which is told in full in the novel:

"One night Frank Costello was sitting in a night club with his blonde, a nice broad, and at the table he's also got Rocky Marciano, Tony Canzoneri and Two-ton Tony Galento. It's a guinea party," my father said. "The orchestra is playing. So Frank says to Galento, 'Hey, Two-ton, I want you to dance with Gloria.' That makes Galento nervous. Who wants to dance with the big man's girl? What if she likes him? 'Hey, Mr. Costello,' says Two-ton Tony, 'you know I'm no dancer.' 'Put down your beer,' says Frank, 'and get out there and move. You'll be very good.' So Two-ton Tony gets up and trots Gloria around the floor at arm's length, and when he comes back, Costello tells the same thing to Canzoneri, and he has to take Gloria out. Then it's Rocky's turn. [. . .]

"Well, when the number is over, Rocky leads her back. He's feeling better and the others got their nerve up too. They start to rib the big man, very careful, you understand, just a little tasteful chaffing. 'Hey, Mr. Costello,' they say, 'Mr. C., come on, why don't you give your lady a dance?'

"'Will you,' Gloria asks, 'please!'

"'It's your turn, Mr. Frank,' they say."

"Costello," my father told me, "shakes his head. 'Tough guys,' he says, 'don't dance.'"⁴

The anecdote evokes the mythology of the mob and a lost golden age of masculinity, closely associated in the novel with Tim's legendary but undemonstrative father, Dougy (Lawrence Tierney). Tierney was ideal casting partly because of his connection to the cinematic golden age of film noir. In low budget movies such as *Dillinger* (1945) and *The Devil Thumbs A Ride* (1947), Tierney played a version of working class muscle that was amoral, charming, dirtily improvisational, and at

times sociopathic. And unlike more conventionally glamorous tough guy stars of the era, Tierney's menace seemed more than theatrical. He was the perfect low budget Poverty Row star whose reckless life and talents for drinking and violence mirrored his acting roles to the point that he would become a professional liability. For decades he was virtually unemployable, and by the 1980s a relatively forgotten figure. He was therefore ideally placed to be rediscovered by film-makers such as Mailer and Tarantino, or by the makers of *Seinfeld*—his persona ideally fitted a taste for postmodern recuperation of less canonized classic stars, but he could also produce performances of genuine weight which could be comic but were never in themselves campy. As Dougy, he is the calm stoic moral center of *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, and a counterpoint to the hysterical masculinity of the rest of its male performances. It often feels like he's acting in a slightly different film.

Tierny's character Dougy is an old-fashioned tough guy who belongs to America's labor past. And like the unionism that he represents, in the amoral world of *Tough Guys Don't Dance* Dougy is an anachronism. Dougy's masculinity is itself mythological: he embodies a relatively benign form of the codes of conduct expected of the "real man."⁵ *Tough Guys Don't Dance* invites us to find Dougy's stoicism and stony unforgivingness comic, but it also invites a certain nostalgic respect for its heroism and implicit morality (and keeping it implicit is a masculine virtue par excellence). Part of what makes Dougy forbidding and at times admirable is that he embodies a kind of maleness that staunchly refuses to show any public signs of vulnerability or weakness, although there are moments in the early interplay of Tierney and O'Neal which are close to genuine tenderness. The critic David Savran has argued that the stoic theme of "taking it like a man" implies the "contradictions connected with a masculine identification":

It implies that masculinity is not an achieved state but a process, a trial through which one passes. But at the same time, this phrase ironically suggests the precariousness and fragility—even perhaps the femininity—of a gender identity that must be fought for again and again and again.⁶

"Femininity, my ass," one can hear Dougy reply. But the kind of maleness he endorses is never settled once and for all: a lifetime of reputation may be unraveled in a moment's weakness. In the novel, Dougy attributes his cancer diagnosis to a story from his union days where he was shot by a gunman. Dougy pursues his attacker for many streets before finally relenting and seeking hospital treatment for his wounds. And no matter what the circumstances, giving up is the beginning of the end for masculinity. It is as if being a tough guy has ultimately something to do with the outrunning of death. This idea is concisely summed up in the movie's one reference to the novel's title:

Six months ago, they told me to stop or I was dead. I stopped. Now the spirits circle around my bed and they tell me to dance. I tell 'em, "Tough guys don't dance." They answer me, "Keep dancing."

The idea here is that masculinity never "stops," that tough guys not only never give up but *can't* ever give up and retain their legend. Cancer (a Mailer obsession) is not only weakening in itself but it is a disease *caused* by weakness. The paradox of masculinity is that while its key value is stoic self-control, it imposes itself in a series of absurd and unachievable demands to "keep dancing," to keep one step ahead of death. The film's title is an exact formula for that double bind. In the end, the movie seems to say, death makes bitches even of a tough guy like Dougy.

Tim Madden's conflicted relationship to his father defines his relationship to masculinity in the world. One of the better formulas for fatherly love is a kind of loving indifference, a love that doesn't care about your feelings but will take care of business. Dougy's readiness to "deep six" the decapitated heads is in this sense a very precise expression of love. However, Dougy is also a character who has very strict ideas about masculinity and what he expects from his son. In a slightly test interview with the gay magazine *The Advocate*, Mailer acknowledged Dougy's bigotry and anti-gay attitudes.⁷ Madden as a child of the 1960s is relatively more socially liberal than his father. Yet his actions in the film are often motivated to placate the paternal superego, to demonstrate to Dougy that he is not a queer or a "cocksucker." He gains Dougy's approval when he tells him in his three years in jail "nobody made me a punk." Asserting oneself as a real man here is closely bound up with standard macho anxieties about homosexuality, weakness and the pecking order (no wonder *The Advocate* weren't exactly fans). Several of the male characters are at pains to avoid being made a patsy by a woman or a punk by a man, and for the would-be tough guy these are for all practical purposes the same fate. The cuckolding of Lonnie Pangborn by Madden on the beach is in part a way of displacing anxieties about Tim's own masculinity after his abandonment by Patty Lareine. Madden's memory loss on that evening is a screen memory not just for his murderous impulses but also his homoerotic ones: perhaps Madden even fears that he has killed Pangborn in a moment of gay panic.⁸

Madden's desire to assert himself as a man also has a political subtext. *Tough Guys Don't Dance* is a parable for 1960s liberalism under pressure. The important conflict here is not with his tough guy left-wing father but with the right-wing conservative police chief Regency. The echo of Reagan in Regency is no accident. The novel describes Regency as follows:

He was large enough to play professional football, and there was no mistaking the competitive gleam in his eye: God, the spirit of competition, and crazy mayhem had come together. Regency looked like one Christian athlete who hated to lose.⁹

Real-life athlete Wings Hauser was cast in the role of Regency (the "Wings" comes from the wing-back position he played in college football). Hauser was a cult star who had made his name in television and in movies made for the home video market. His very physicality was typical of 1980s cinematic macho. The old movie tough guy wasn't necessarily all that athletic, but a new generation of macho action heroes such as Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger were embodying a masculinity that came directly from physical culture.¹⁰ Moreover, this new breed of American muscle was part of a conservative backlash against liberalism, feminism and a perceived post-gay rights softness in American men.¹¹ The central historical trauma here was the American failure to win the war in Vietnam. Stallone's *Rambo* series, and especially the 1985 installment *Rambo: First Blood Part 2*, was an open wish fulfillment revenge fantasy: "Sir, do we get to win this time?" In the 1980s cinema, the maverick lone wolf was the figure to culturally restore American masculine pride and honor.

Regency is a satirical embodiment of that spirit of retributive machismo in 1980s popular culture. *Tough Guys Don't Dance* revolves around Regency's plot to frame Madden for the deaths of Patty Lareine and Jessica Pond. This revenge is ostensibly personal: Regency is now married to Madden's former lover Madeleine, and holds him responsible for involving her in orgies and the car accident that left her unable to have children. But this revenge plot is also motivated by the desire to "frame" 1960s liberalism in general, and it is this spirit of conservative retribution that is at the heart of this drama of buried heads in the marijuana patch. Vietnam is key here:



Figure 18.2 Tim Madden (Ryan O'Neal) and Regency (Wings Hauser) stand-off in *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

Regency is a veteran where Tim is a 1960s liberal and ex-con. In a scene at Madeleine and Regency's home, the camera pans to an embroidery reading "Revenge is a dish which people of taste eat cold," then down to images of Regency and his platoon from the war. The picture of a psychotic looking Hauser reads "My best friend in Vietnam 67–70," and perhaps the joke here is that Regency's best friend is the machete he carries, his version of the iconic-in-the-1980s Rambo knife.

Hauser's performance is at the camp heart of the movie (the actor once said that "I've never been able to find the top to go over"¹²). He represents a completely different way of "playing" masculinity from the classic model of the tough guy. The taciturnity of Tierney's acting style, which is consistent with a certain realism, is the polar antithesis of Hauser's over-the-top performance which plays machismo with a barely contained and entertaining hysteria:

Regency: Life gives a man two balls. Use 'em. It's a rare day I don't bang two women—matter of fact, I don't sleep too well unless I get that second hump in. Both sides of my nature are obliged to express themselves.

Dougy: Tell me, what are your two sides?

Regency: The enforcer and the maniac.

Madden: And who do we have the honor of addressing?

Regency: You never met the maniac.

As a self-confessed “enforcer” and “maniac,” Regency embodies what Savran calls “the homicidal potential of paranoid white men”¹³ in post-Vietnam popular culture. The hallmarks of his personality are authoritarian control combined with its opposite, maniacal frenzy. In this Regency not only resembles the *Rambo*-era revenging killing machine, but also the Law in its form as Freudian superego. Slavoj Žižek argues that law is always split between its rational public authority and what he calls its “obscene superego supplement.”¹⁴ This split between enforcer and maniac in Regency is a split between conservative law and order on the one hand and murderous revenge on the other. The plot of the movie hinges on the revealing of this duality.

When Regency first meets Madden, he pulls him up for being “foul mouthed.” But as the revenge plot develops, Regency’s own murderous obscenity comes increasingly to the fore. Regency is a much less forgiving and deadly variation on the paternal superego than the merely old-fashioned Dougy. In the novel, Madden assess Regency as follows: “There was much to be said for Regency as a cop. Pressure came off him and it was constant. Soon, you made a mistake.”¹⁵ The consistent pressure Regency applies aims to expose not just practical inconsistencies in Madden’s testimony, but also any signs of liberalism or softness. For Regency, what constitutes machismo is a certain practical intellect, the ability to assess people and situations with unequivocal and righteous judgment, a quality he calls “acumen” and that Patty Lareine calls “judgment.” Acumen is not simply an entrepreneurial quality, although this element of Reaganite self-interest is involved in this drama of real estate and cocaine deals. It’s also an aggressively masculine trait that smokes out any signs of effeminacy or weakness. In this world, masculinity and femininity are functions not of gender but of whether one takes the active or passive role in sexual and business relations alike.

Indeed, Regency first questions Madden’s “acumen” because he has failed to sniff out that Lonnie Pangborn is a “swish” or a “faggot.” Regency has a hostility to homosexuality which is more fleshed out in the novel but rhetorically ramped-up in the movie: “I’m just a country boy, Tim. I’d like to kill homos.” Regency’s rhetoric of vengeance here takes in not only a general assault on 1960s liberalism, but a specific conservative reaction to AIDS hysteria. Provincetown’s large gay community plays little role in *Tough Guys Don’t Dance* the movie (aside from a few leather boys and transvestites in the party scene), but there is a reason why the town is a relevant location for the revenge plot. A few months before Mailer wrote the novel, Provincetown had been the subject of major media interest after a period of panic that all but shut down summer tourism. Provincetown witnessed a thousand AIDS death at the height of the epidemic,¹⁶ the atmosphere of fear and reaction made its way into the novel in Regency’s innuendos about the gay “plague.”¹⁷ Provincetown in the 1980s is therefore a charged setting for Mailer’s drama of masculine crisis and homosexual panic. Mailer said that he was preoccupied in the novel with the “spectrum of male behavior”¹⁸ (Mailer here is yet again an ambivalent heir of Kinsey). *Tough Guys Don’t Dance* is not only full of pressured heterosexuals like Madden or homophobes such as Regency, but a number of minor gay and bisexual characters, the most notable of whom is Wardley Meeks III, played by John Bedford Lloyd. By choosing the name Wardley Meeks III, Mailer was playing on the name of Reagan’s key friend and adviser Edwin Meese III (Meese was Reagan’s leading drug warrior, and the joke is that Mailer lends his name to a rich bisexual lawyer and would-be cocaine dealer). The second half of the film is almost entirely devoted to Meeks’ frame story. Meeks attempts in the film to assert his masculinity by taking on the avaricious Patty Lareine. The problem for him, however, is proving his masculine worth to her, which he seeks to do through criminal activity and ultimately by shooting her. Yet Wardley ultimately gives up on his pursuit of masculinity.

In the interview with *The Advocate*, Mailer argued that the “greatest exchange of love” in the film is the “tender” moment Madden and Wardley share on the beach before Wardley commits suicide.¹⁹

Wardley's character goes to the heart of the movie's ambivalent treatment of masculinity and homosexuality. However sensitive the treatment of his unhappy quest for a masculine self, the movie is not above playing Wardley for camp laughs in lines like "I'm so wrong for this kind of imbroglia!"

Mailer was always wary of describing *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, or at least the novel, as a work of camp.²⁰ However, the movie's pastiche of film noir and its bad taste humor and over the top acting are clearly camp. So too are a number of schlocky motifs such as the horror movie cackle of the Provincetown whores which shadows Madeleine and Madden's domestic bliss at the film's end. But to see where Mailer's film fits into arguments about camp, we need to go back to the avant-garde roots of Mailer's cinematic practice in the 1960s. In his essay "Some Dirt in the Talk," Mailer wrote about his first avant-garde experiment *Wild 90* (1968). The film is a freely improvised movie about gangsters, played by Mailer and his friends Mickey Knox and Buzz Farbar, hiding out in a New York apartment. In this essay, Mailer recalls being conscious early on of making a form of "gangster-movie camp," but that the project as it developed became a much more serious take on male performance:

There is hardly a guy alive who is not an actor to the hilt—for the simplest of reasons. He cannot be tough all the time. There are days when he is hung over, months when he is out of condition, weeks when he is in love and soft all over. Still, his rep is to be tough. So he acts to fill the gaps. A comedy of adopted manners surrounds the probing each tough guy is forever giving his brother. *Wild 90*, which is filled with nothing so much as these vanities, bluffs, ego-supports, and downright collapses of front is therefore hilarious to such people. They thought the picture was manna.²¹

Mailer was looking for, in other words, a new kind of realism, not one based upon how gangsters actually are but on an exaggerated idea of how men socially perform. Obscenity and bad taste could thereby be welded to a kind of serious intention. In *Maidstone* (1970), this interest in masculinity as front was politicized to take in the fevered political climate of the 1960s and its assassinations. This was not entirely inconsistent with the most famous articulation of camp in 1964, that of Susan Sontag, who also drew connections with avant-garde ideas of theatricality: "To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater."²² Camp for Sontag is merely an extreme form of being that has its roots in the Renaissance ideas of the self. And though Mailer was more guarded about camp as a sensibility, he saw potential in it for a kind of masculine super-realism.

Justin Bozung sees the movie of *Tough Guys Don't Dance* as a cinematic take on the idea of the *Theatrum Mundi*,²³ the very metaphor of world as stage that for Sontag was so central to camp. The baroque Shakespearean elements of the film, even more than in the novel, frequently cross over into the bad taste extremes of camp theatricality. The performances of Debra Sandlund, Wings Hauser and John Bedford Lloyd all testify to this. So does Mailer's bloody-minded insistence on including the now infamous "Oh God! oh man!" footage against the wishes of almost everyone else on the shoot.²⁴

It is as if in terms of his own practice and preoccupations Mailer wanted to push both realism and camp as far as he could within the formal confines of a low budget mainstream movie. These were conscious artistic decisions: if *Tough Guys Don't Dance* hits some bum notes, it was because Mailer wanted to hit them. The deliberately bad dialogue and the artificial performances have a quasi-Brechtian quality which makes it difficult to distinguish the good-bad from the merely bad.



Figure 18.3 Norman Mailer, Isabella Rossellini, and Ryan O'Neal in a promotional photo shot for the marketing of *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987). Photo courtesy of Joel Meyerowitz.

There is an estrangement effect in the slightly hysterical “badness” of the delivery of Mailer’s best-worst lines. All these characters, with the sole exception of Dougy, are people caught in the act of playing a role (this was more of a problem for the film’s bigger stars Ryan O’Neal and Isabella Rossellini). The film attempts something like David Lynch’s distinctively dreamlike, slightly “off” dialogue in *Blue Velvet* (1986). Lynch was the lodestone for *Tough Guys Don’t Dance*. Mailer was trying to position his movie somewhere between trash and postmodern art-house cinema.

Mailer’s exploitation of postmodern camp is key to the movie’s interest in masculinity. *Tough Guys Don’t Dance* takes the subject of masculinity and its politics very seriously in one sense, but in another its cult status suggests that it has more often been received as a more or less conscious example of macho camp. The film is both conscious and guarded about camp as an aesthetic for understanding maleness. As Sontag insisted, camp is not exclusively a gay sensibility, but it is in its pioneering essence a gay cultural attitude. An important strategy behind much cinematic camp is the attempt to both expose or deflate masculinity as a masquerade by exaggeration or excessive homage. The confrontational bad taste aesthetics of John Waters can certainly be felt in *Tough Guys Don’t Dance* (Waters also lived in Provincetown and would often have Mailer as a dinner guest).²⁵ And in the more gay-conscious culture that was emerging post-1960s and post-Stonewall in America, masculine anxiety and excess was itself beginning to take on some camp undertones as well as menacing ones. The backlash movies of Stallone and Schwarzenegger were also heralds of a new postmodern attitude of pastiche in popular culture that saw “masculinity” itself as increasingly as cartoonish or self-obsessed. As the critic Mark Simpson argues, this was the age of the “male impersonator.”²⁶ Masculinity was both the visible and aestheticized marker of Reaganite political wish fulfillment and a mode of jokey entertainment that was never to be taken too seriously

or played with too much realism. And if Mailer wanted to send up the former, he was sufficiently serious about masculinity as a subject to be wary of playing it merely for laughs or to keep it at postmodern distance.

The movie is nevertheless thoroughly postmodern in its pastiche of cinematic genres and archetypes. And for all its interest in the “tough guy,” *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, like so much of the postmodern neo-noir of the 1970s and 1980s, is also interested in Hollywood's classic female archetypes. The movie relies heavily on noirish traditions of the femme fatale, but also a wider American cultural opposition of the blonde and the brunette. The relevant archetypes here are Marilyn Monroe and Jane Russell in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (1953), a film that Mailer admired as one of the early “classics of Camp.”²⁷

Marilyn was a representative twentieth century figure for Mailer exactly because of her understanding of sexual being as a kind of role-play. The blonde, more than the fast-talking smarts of the loyal brunette, is the cultural embodiment of that idea. And in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, Mailer pushes the idea of the role-playing blonde beyond the coy sexuality of the musicals or the darker seductiveness of noir to a more pornified and violent register, one that isn't just open to charges of sexism and misogyny but seems to openly invite them. The novel's obsession with the inauthenticity of the blonde is condensed in the movie in a single exchange which is typical of the movie's more *outré* dialogue:

Patty Lareine: Honey, I *am* a witch, good blondes are.

Madden: You're not a real blond.

Patty Lareine: My pussy hair was bright gold in high school, until I went out and scorched *it* with the football team.

Patty Lareine is a social embodiment of trashy bad taste, and this style of dialogue is perfectly suited to her. As Mailer writes in the novel, “Any lady who chooses to become a blonde is truly a blonde.”²⁸ Being a blonde here is literally about getting away from poor Southern “roots” and being an object of one's own creation. Cinematic blonderness is not only about getting on in the world through sexual manipulation, but also the sexual allure of money in its own right. Lareine is a classic femme fatale: grasping, treacherous, tough and tenacious. She's also, as played by Debra Sandlund, great fun and has something of a redneck “Maggie the Cat” about her.

The brunette is the opposing archetype in *Tough Guys Don't Dance*: The key character here is Madeleine, with whom Madden finds domestic bliss after defeating Regency and thus resolving the panic plot. Madeleine was played by Isabella Rossellini, herself a member of European cinema aristocracy through her distinguished parents, but newly famous to American audiences owing to her career-defining role in *Blue Velvet* (yet another sign of Mailer's indebtedness to that film). The casting of Isabella Rossellini with her art house credentials and European exoticism reprises the idea of brunette seriousness and blonde trashiness. But this contest between the brunette and the blonde also maps onto the film's political geography. Madeleine's authenticity is vouched for by her Brooklyn-Italian roots, both East Coast and European. Lareine and Jessica Pond's blonde inauthenticity by contrast suggests not only the classic duplicity of the femme fatale, but also the simulation and avarice of the 1980s: Hollywood and the porn industry here meets Reaganite self-interest and Santa Barbara values. If the brunette is Eastern, the blonde is Western or Southern. Moreover, the artificiality of the blonde is central to the movie's baroque plot. The film's grisly joke on the subject is the severed heads of Pond and Lareine, which act as confused signifiers of

femininity literally torn from the body. The duplicity of the femme fatale is through this violent twist planted on to the movie's interest in postmodern simulation and violence.

Regency's psychopathy is most on display in the scene where he symbolically recreates the murders by mutilating Polaroids of Pond and Lareine, and fittingly he has heard of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). The movie's grisly subplot comes not from noir or even from horror but is a direct borrowing from the slasher genre. *Tough Guys Don't Dance*'s appropriation of a style of film-making of the 1940s is also alive to contemporary forms such as the porn video and the video nasty. The detective tradition, once seen as a pulp commercial form, had by the 1980s a certain literary and cinematic respectability. *Tough Guys* recreates this tradition with its sense of the trash aesthetics of contemporary commercial forms which were still to be canonized in American culture. Mailer here was exploring the violence of 1970s and 1980s cinema. But his own representation of that violence was curiously restrained. Most of the movie's bad taste and excess is in the dialogue, not in the action: where there is violence or gore, the camera often pulls away. Jerry Stiller, of all people, said about *Tough Guys* that: "It's a film about violence and yet there's hardly any violence in it."²⁹ This seems to me crucial to the movie's aesthetic. The only authentically "slasher" moment of the movie is a high camp moment where the film's stooges, Spider and Stoodie, draw a highly unrealistic disembodied corpse from a vat of fluid. It's possible that there were budgetary or technical restrictions on the violence in the film, but it strikes me as likely that Mailer was less interested in making a full-blown slasher film as he was in hitting single exorbitant notes.

But could it also have been that Mailer was concerned about how contemporary cinema was treating the serious subject of violence as an aesthetic? In a review of Bret Easton Ellis' *American Psycho*, among other things perhaps the definitive novel about the Reagan 1980s, Mailer discussed this very subject:

The suspicion creeps in that much of what the author knows about violence does not come from the imagination (which in a great writer can need no more than the suspicion of real experience to give us the whole beast) but out of what he has picked up from *Son and Grandson of Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and the rest of the filmic Jukes and Kallikaks. We are being given horror-shop plastic.³⁰

Here Mailer seems to be criticizing the very "horror-shop" aesthetics that he was deploying in his own defiantly schlocky 1980s detective novel and its film adaptation. Part of this was generational: Mailer's review of *American Psycho* is strongly marked by competitive oedipal struggle with the younger writer. But there is also a sense in which Mailer is at odds here with the anti-realist attitude to violence in postmodern literature and film. Postmodern aesthetic violence represents a curious return to *l'art pour l'art* in its allusive relationship to cinematic history. *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, with its generic mixing of noir, Western and slasher aesthetics is clearly in this postmodern mold. While largely overlooked at the time, the film was admired by Quentin Tarantino, whose enormous influence as a director comes down to his highly cinema literate blend of aestheticized violence with realistic pop-cultural dialogue.

Like *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, Tarantino's breakthrough film *Reservoir Dogs* (1992) was about men and violence, and men playing men (Tim Roth's character infiltrates the gang by learning a script, which is also about learning the language and gestures of a certain kind of tough guy).

Tough Guys Don't Dance is an avant-garde trash film that is ambivalent about the very artistic forms it was deploying to often entertaining effect. But Mailer was also exploring ideas about cinema, masculine identity and violence that were central to his earlier avant-garde period of film-



Figure 18.4 Actress Debra Sandlund at rest during the shooting of *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987). Photo courtesy of Bonnie Barber.

making. And in doing so, Mailer gave us his most open statement about America in the 1980s. The nostalgic cultural conservatism of the Reagan era was accompanied by an intensification of the drug wars and a generally heightened rhetoric of law and order. But it was also the decade of corporate junk bond raiders and free market ideology, in which the most aggressive elements of the frontier spirit were revisited in a new way. *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, viewed in this light, is like *American Psycho* a satire on the decade's manners and violence. Here is Mailer again on Ellis's novel:

American Psycho is saying that the eighties were spiritually disgusting and the author's presentation is the crystallization of such horror. When an entire new class thrives on the ability to make money out of the manipulation of money, and becomes altogether obsessed with the surface of things—that is, with luxury commodities, food, and appearance—then, in effect, says Ellis, we have entered a period of the absolute manipulation of humans by humans: The objective correlative of total manipulation is coldcock murder.³¹

Tough Guys Don't Dance is a curious artifact, both in relationship to Mailer's literary career and to the 1980s postmodern culture of which it is a part. Mailer was clearly having enormous fun with his materials, and was consciously exploring an aesthetics of bad taste. It's no masterpiece even in these terms, but it does exploit a careful patchwork of cinematic genres. He was also arguably

parodying his own reputation for masculine excess and even misogyny. But the film's exploration of violence and masculinity is more politically complex than this implies. Like *American Psycho*, which was released to a howl of protest from women's groups, the movie revolves around dismembered female bodies. Yet Mailer's reaction to *American Psycho* suggests he was anything but glib about violence in cinema and literature. While he admired aspects of its aesthetics, he described *American Psycho* as an "ugly" and "deranging" work, and even expressed concerns as to the novel's representation of violence toward women. This is quite startling coming from the author of *An American Dream* and *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. But this attitude might help us to see *Tough Guys Don't Dance*'s revenge plot from a reverse angle. It is hard to exactly see the movie as a feminist film. But politically its satire is very much targeted against the 1980s conservative backlash, and it is a woman, Madeleine, who finally kills off Regency. Never call a feminist small potatoes.

Notes

- 1 *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987), [Film] Dir. Norman Mailer, USA: MGM/UA. This article is an adaptation of two pieces I have previously written about Mailer's 1984 source novel. See "The Addiction of Masculinity: Norman Mailer's *Tough Guys Don't Dance* and the Cultural Politics of Reaganism," in *Journal of Modern Literature* #30, 2006 Fall: 23–30. Also: "From Egypt to Provincetown, By Trump Air: Modernist History and the Return of the Repressed in *Ancient Evenings* and *Tough Guys Don't Dance*," in *Norman Mailer's Later Fictions: Ancient Evenings Through Castle in the Forest*, John Whalen-Bridge (ed.), New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010: 15–33.
- 2 "Worst Line Reading Ever," YouTube October 31, 2007. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y9KyBdPeKHg> (accessed: April 20, 2015). The clip, to date, has over 4.5 million views.
- 3 Mailer, Norman (1964), *The Presidential Papers*, Harmondsworth: Penguin: 95–112. For more on Provincetown and its history, see Peter Manso: *P'town: Art, Sex, and Money on the Outer Cape*, New York: Scribner, 2002 and Michael Cunningham: *Land's End: A Walk Through Provincetown*, London: Vintage, 2004.
- 4 Mailer, Norman (1984), *Tough Guys Don't Dance*, New York: Ballantine: 48.
- 5 "Real Man" is the title of Angelo Badalamenti's synth-rock theme song on the soundtrack to Mailer's film.
- 6 Savran, David (1998), *Taking It Like A Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: 38.
- 7 Judell, Brandon (1987), "Why Norman Mailer Won't Dance," in *The Advocate*, October 27, 54–5.
- 8 Mailer, Norman (1984), *Tough Guys Don't Dance*: 100. Homosexual panic is a central theme of both Mailer's novel and film. In the novel, Madden's specifically recalls attacks of "homosexual panic" in his past, citing the Freudian genesis of that idea. Madden links that episode of homosexual panic to his new tattoo and his period of memory loss.
- 9 Simpson, Mark (1994), *Male Impersonators: Men Performing Masculinity*, London: Cassell, for more on the aestheticisation of the male body in the 1980s.
- 10 Faludi, Susan (1992), *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against Women*, London: Vintage.
- 11 Wings Hauser: Biography on IMDb: *The Internet Movie Database*. Available online: http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0369567/bio?ref_=nm_q1_1 (accessed: April 12, 2015).
- 12 Savran, David (1998), *Taking It Like A Man: White Masculinity, Masochism, and Contemporary American Culture*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press: 5.
- 13 Žižek, Slavoj (2009), "Ego Ideal and the Superego: Lacan as a Viewer of *Casablanca*" in Lacan.com, May 4. Available online: <http://www.lacan.com/essays/?p=182> (accessed: April 13, 2015).

- 14 Manso, Peter (2002), *P'town: Art, Sex, and Money on the Outer Cape*, New York: Scribner: 258.
- 15 Lennon, J. Michael (2013), *Norman Mailer: A Double Life*, London: Simon & Schuster: 587.
- 16 Judell, Brandon (1987), "Why Norman Mailer Won't Dance," in *The Advocate*, October 27, 54–5.
- 17 Whalen-Bridge, John (2006) "The Karma of Words" in *Journal of Modern Literature* #30: 13.
- 18 *The Essential Mailer* (1983), London: New English Library: 362.
- 19 Judell, Brandon (1987), "Why Norman Mailer Won't Dance," in *The Advocate*, October 27, 54–5.
- 20 Sontag, Susan (2001), *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York: Picador: 278.
- 21 Mailer, Norman (1967), "Some Dirt in the Talk" from *Esquire*, December 1967.
- 22 Sontag, Susan (2001), *Against Interpretation and Other Essays*, New York: Picador: 279.
- 23 Personal discussion with editor.
- 24 *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987), [Film] Dir. Norman Mailer, USA: MGM/UA. On the special features for the 2003 DVD release Mailer talks about the "Oh God! Oh man!" scene in the extra featurette: "*Norman Mailer in Provincetown*."
- 25 Bennett, Marcus (2013), "Maya Angelou is Still at Odds with Norman Mailer" in *Vanity Fair*, October 18. Available online: <http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2013/10/maya-angelou-is-still-at-odds-with-normanmailer> (accessed: April 2015).
- 26 Simpson, Mark (1994), *Male Impersonators: Men Performing Masculinity*, London: Cassell: 15. In his introduction in his book, Simpson calls Mailer himself a "male impersonator."
- 27 Norman Mailer, *Marilyn* (1973; London: Chancellor, 1992), 106.
- 28 Norman Mailer, *Marilyn* (1973; London: Chancellor, 1992), 87.
- 29 Quoted in Paul Brenner, "Norman Mailer on His Films", amc blog 25 July 2007. Web. (accessed: 13 April 2015).
- 30 Mailer, Norman *The Time of Our Time*, (London: Abacus, 1998), 1075.
- 31 Mailer, Norman *The Time of Our Time*, (London: Abacus, 1998), 1073.

19

NORMAN MAILER'S "WINDOWS"

John Bailey A.S.C.

Provincetown, Massachusetts has long been a literal as well as a metaphoric harbor: a literal one for the Portuguese fishermen who ply their catch from its wharf at day's end, a metaphoric one for the writers, painters and photographers who have used its rich visual setting to display their own artistic catch. For Norman Mailer, his sloped, third floor garret writing studio with its broad window view from his desk, was both refuge and a call-to-arms, the ever-changing sea and sky of Provincetown a reflection of his own mercurial ambitions as a key figure in twentieth century American culture and letters.

At low tide in misty, raking, late afternoon light, the view across the harbor out toward Long Point can look like a crepuscular Turner oil painting. Or, as the incoming tide slips toward shore in bright sunlight along the residential streets, it can look like a clear Cape Light photograph of Joel Meyerowitz. Or, at the peak of a sudden squall, the inky skies can look like Böcklin's "Isle of the Dead," wind-driven waves breaking against the white railing and planked deck below the studio, cascading over picture windows in the Mailer home at 627 Commercial Street.

And on one memorable, bleak afternoon when we were filming Norman's movie *Tough Guys Don't Dance* in November 1986, it seemed as if the demonic sea and racing clouds would swamp his house, sweeping us all out into a deserved, dark oblivion, like the fate awaiting his movie's doomed characters.

Norman's film, adapted from his pulp mystery novel of the same title, has been described by some as "neo-noir," by others as "cheap pulp." Both labels delighted him. The movie starred Ryan O'Neal, Isabella Rossellini, Debra Sandlund and one of the great classic noir tough guy actors, Lawrence Tierney, once ruggedly handsome, but now bald and gone to fat. His deep voice, impressively, had remained the same from his 1940s stardom, as had his legendary cantankerousness. Tierney may have embodied one aspect of Norman's complex soul, the take no prisoners, in your face, tough guy. But the Norman Mailer that I and our crew worked with on the day-to-day production was far more complex than any B-movie bad guy; Norman, unlikely as it may seem to some of his angry feminist and literary opponents like Kate Millett and Gore Vidal, was by 1986 a somewhat beloved *eminence grise*, a perhaps reluctantly tamed Lion in Winter. It was this latter facet of his multi-faceted personality that greeted us cheerily and full of excitement at call time every morning of the schedule. It was this same twinkly man who phoned his wife Norris every evening after wrap; it was then early to bed, jealously harboring his energy for tomorrow's on set rigors. Although Norris Church was the sixth and last of his wives, she was truly *his* life's love, though this is not to deny the shoals their marital boat had sailed through. Norris was a dedicated painter with her own rich life, not unlike the role of Isabella Rossellini as Madeline Regency, Ryan O'Neal's (Tim Madden) former lover. Norman knew Provincetown even better than

how he *thought* he knew women, though, God knows, he, when younger, had been *in extremis* with many strong women.

In addition to the many beach, bar and town scenes of the movie, key sequences were filmed inside Mailer's house. It is here that Madden wakes one morning after an amnesiac drinking binge—to discover his jacket covered in blood. Norman and Norris's home, next to their friend, painter Robert Motherwell, was refuge and escape from New York City and their Brooklyn Heights townhouse. Their Cape Cod home was spacious, with five baths and five bedrooms. The living room, with its near floor to ceiling length windows, presented the ever-changing light as a kind of crazed backdrop to the drug and alcohol-fueled goings on in the house/movie set.

I recall when Norman showed me his writing studio with its low ceiling that I felt I had entered an inner sanctum. It wasn't difficult to imagine him sitting there typing out his thoughts on American society run amok in a cocktail of greed, drugs and sexual promiscuity—or researching material for his later historical novels, his desk swamped by books and articles in this early Internet, search engine age. (This is the room closely described in the novel, the book's first person narrator and possible murderer, being also a writer.) When we scouted the studio for several scripted scenes I didn't know yet how I could make this tight space work. Especially with its third floor windows too high for lights to punch through from below, and with few places to hide even a small light in the ceiling, I made the decision where possible to opt for "available light," there being no single scene long enough to require strict lighting continuity. Alternately, a single low light would rake across the walls.

Norman spoke eloquently to me about the shifting landscape moods created by Cape and Provincetown light, a light that not always leaves you as poetically inspired as in the split second exposure of a still photograph. Watching in real time, the gentle but broad tidal shifts on the sloping beach outside Norman's house was so unlike the high dunes, wild grasses and sand fences on the opposite shore of the hook of Land's End: the light and land there at Race Point seeming to generate its own psychic disequilibrium. Surrounded on three sides by water, the narrow streets and alleys of the town and the tilting shacks and looming tower of the Pilgrim Monument seem to further destabilize the movie's already lost souls.

Provincetown's year round population is only a few thousand, swelling to ten times that number in the summer tourist months. It's no accident that most of the movie's crazed misfits are accidental tourists passing through in November, as though they had driven out along the Cape's US Route 6 until they simply ran out of road. (Their bizarre behavior is more easily noted by locals in these off-season months, when Provincetown is spared the freak show circus, then deemed "normal," of summer madness.) Norman spoke to me about this "end of the road" metaphor, never in any abstracted way, only as background to why he felt the lunatics that populate the film are both the dregs of a lost American psychic spirit and vessels of the darker side of our more benign selves. Early on, in pre-production as we were scouting locations, he drove me out to Pilgrim Landing where the Pilgrims first dropped anchor in the New World on November 11, 1620. For Norman, this was the spot that symbolized the beginning of Colonial America and its Protestant ethos, not the more oft-cited second landing days later in Plymouth. I think this paved over, quasi-public park at the edge of town with its adjacent ugly motel, embodied for him the dashed hopes and dreams of a civilization that had run obscenely off the rails in the movie we were about to make. I told him about how my wife, Carol, and I long ago had visited Robinson Jeffers's self-built rock home, the Tor House, near the Big Sur coast of California. Jeffers, a self-mythologized man like Norman, had seen this rugged Western shore as antipode to how Norman saw Provincetown's Pilgrim Landing, both writers sharing a dark metaphysical vision of America.



Figure 19.1 Norman Mailer, John Bailey A.S.C., and camera assistant set up a shot in Provincetown during the filming of *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987). Photo courtesy of Alicia Alexander.

Norman writes about the feeling of late autumn in Provincetown in an early passage of the novel; it has stuck with me, the deliberate archness of his description translating into the movie's dialogue, even as he sets the stage for the immoral deeds about to descend:

There could be no other town like it. If you were sensitive to crowds, you might expire in summer from human propinquity. On the other hand, if you were unable to bear loneliness, the vessel of your person could fill with dread during the long winter.

To not be open to the literary cadences of Tim Madden as narrator/writer, and to not understand this voice as translated into the film is like criticizing a writer like David Mamet for not writing "real" dialogue. Recently, I watched a YouTube video of two young, smarmy film "critics" ridiculing the language of *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. I put quotation marks around "critics" because it's clear in the video that their online rant *Welcome to the Basement* has no goal other than to condescend to Norman's deliberately hyperbolic dialogue. Norman's arch diction is merely a manifestation of the characters' misbegotten souls. It has amazed me that few of the film's critics have understood the underlying dark, even demonic, humor that Norman placed into the mouths of these hell-bent for self-destruction characters. The crazed atmosphere of summer's tourists, a despised but tolerated threat to the town's year round residents, is described in the novel:

So if you want to look for some little splash of money, you waited for summer when enclaves of psychoanalysts and art-oriented well-to-do members of the liberal establishment came up from New York to be flanked by a wide panorama of gay society plus the narcs and dope dealers,

and half of Greenwich village and SoHo. Painters, presumptive painters, motorcycle gangs, fuckups, hippies, beatniks and all their children came in, plus tens of thousands of tourists a day driving in from every state of the Union to see for a few hours what Provincetown looked like, because there it was—on the extremity of the map. People have a tropism for the end of the road.

The dark and empty wintry life of the movie's dramatic and visual space informs every page of the novel, though when Norman and I spoke about "translating" the book to film I had no sense that he, the movie director, had any desire to protect the author's work: quite the contrary. It was disconcerting how eagerly he wanted to have the film be a work standing on its own. Norman was certainly no apprentice to film directing, though some would argue that "directing" is not exactly what Mailer had done in his three late-1960s, *cinéma vérité* style films, *Wild 90*, *Beyond the Law*, and in the meta-movie, drug-fueled mayhem of *Maidstone*. All three of these works are available in a set from The Criterion Collection; today, almost half a century from their making, this trilogy seems not only to be a window into the crazed Zeitgeist of the time, but oddly prescient of the digital loosey-goosey camera aesthetics of many of today's indie movies.

Norman was aiming at something different with the film of *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. He wanted to embrace the gloss and veneer of older, classic Hollywood editing and cinematography styles, just as he wanted the movie's dialogue and performances to reference the tropes of the more literate of B-movie scripts. A few years before meeting Norman I had photographed another insistently stylized film about the life of Japanese writer Yukio Mishima. Directed by Paul Schrader, *Mishima* (1985) had non-realistic sets designed by Eiko Ishioka and a strongly rhythmic, minimalist music score by Philip Glass. The American producer of *Mishima* was Tom Luddy, a man with a deep appreciation of cinema history and genre. And now, Luddy was the producer of Norman's film. The fledgling production designer Armin Ganz was also engaged; he had an immediate bead on the set design and "Palm Beach" dressing for the house, as well as great instincts in finding the town and beach locations that Norman wanted. Armin and I discussed that uneasy mix of the house's visual vulgarity juxtaposed against the ever-shifting beauty of the land and sea outside Provincetown. Few other directors I had worked with had so deep an understanding of the visually dramatic, even metaphysical, landscape of his film.

Angelo Badalamenti was chosen as the composer; his movie scores were lush and melodic, with hints of darkness evocative of Bernard Herrmann, Miklos Rosza, or Max Steiner, composers from the heyday of film noir. A dozen years later Badalamenti also scored *Forever Mine* (1999), another noir-esque, stylized drama I photographed for Schrader, a film whose aesthetics embody many similarities to *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. Both of these films have been objects of much critical derision, movies whose stylistic choices, even obsessions, were so out of step with audience expectations, that they suffered the same fate of near oblivion. I've no doubt that both of these anomalous, darkly humorous movies will one day be re-evaluated, much as 1940s B-movies of Sirk, Dwan and Mann have been by today's *cinéastes*.

Growing up in the Far West, removed from East Coast intellectual navel gazing, and its once predictable but now outdated condescension to the rest of the country, I knew Mailer's writings. I had read *The Naked and the Dead* and *The Deer Park*, in high school in the late 1950s, then *An American Dream*, and *Why We Are in Vietnam?* as they were published in the mid-1960s. I had followed Norman's very public social and political life during these tumultuous years. He was a co-founder of *The Village Voice* and even ran for mayor of New York City. When I spent a college junior year abroad, I was taken aback at the high esteem my Austrian teachers and friends had of

Norman, his writing a barometer of America's "barbaric yap," a theme of compelling interest to them, but even more so for his irreverence toward America's literary establishment.

Before I began to disappear into mainstream movies as a camera assistant in 1969, and emerged a few years later as a camera operator, I took an anarchist's delight in following Mailer's ongoing, unpredictable political and gender war escapades. My own origins were deep, deep blue-collar; Mailer's tweaking of the East Coast establishment gave me courage to not be intimidated by the *New York Review of Books* or *Paris Review's* elitism even as I devoured their pages after returning to California. I was now newly intoxicated by European cinema and the French "Nouvelle Vague," anticipating graduate studies in film at U.S.C. In that pre-VHS video era there was only one way to see foreign and independent films and that was by alternative newspaper ads, seeking out unlikely screening sites. I remember seeing *Maidstone* in 16mm projected on a bed sheet in a converted house on Las Palmas Avenue in Hollywood. The cinematic combo of the outsiders Andy Warhol and Norman Mailer was for me a lure beyond their already larger than life personas.

When Tom Luddy contacted me about photographing Norman's film I was conflicted, though not because I had doubts about working with Norman as a director. I've always been attracted to edgy material and have enjoyed surprises in the offbeat visions of smart writer/directors. Who was a more totemic American writer than Norman Mailer? However, I had two immediate issues to deal with. The producing company of Cannon Films headed by two sometimes nasty Israeli cousins, Menahem Golan and Yoram Globus, had a history of making only non-union features and I was by 1986 a proper IATSE union Director of Photography, not inclined to work with such an aggressively anti-labor entity as Cannon. Plus, I had already committed to photographing a film of Spaulding Gray's theatrical monologue *Swimming to Cambodia* (1987). The first impediment of non-union was worked around by my not taking a "director of photography" credit—to this day I am credited as "visual consultant" in the end title credits. Jonathan Demme, director of the Gray monologue, and Norman and Luddy were able to schedule their projects so that I would miss only one day's filming on the weekend I flew to Manhattan to shoot Spaulding's monologue in Soho's Performing Garage.

When I returned to Provincetown to continue the film I was still under the spell of Spaulding's work. Early in *Swimming to Cambodia* he talks about a cloud of evil that floats around the world and from time to time comes down and settles in places like Germany or Chile or Cambodia. Mailer, too, believed that a cloud of evil somehow settled over Provincetown (though of course on a much smaller scale). In the same way that Spaulding said that Manhattan was an island somewhere off the coast of America, it seemed to me that as we got deeper into the filming of his movie, Norman, too, saw the rough coast of Helltown as an historic abode of evil at the very tip of a sandy spit somewhere off the coast of America. I've never spoken of this odd parallel between the two men's visions but, different as Norman and Spaulding were as writers, I think they shared a sense of the dark hearts of their fellow man.

Shortly after we began filming, the Boston unions got wind of our renegade project and we were visited on the set in Provincetown by business reps of the Teamsters and the IATSE; they decided to shut us down until a union contract would be negotiated. In fact, nearly all of the crew was already in the IATSE. (A job was a job and at the time there simply was not much movie work in Boston, partly because the unions were so hard ass.) One morning as we stood outside the filming perimeter in support of, but not part of the Boston pickets, Norman arrived, took a look at us and at the slowly moving file of union picketers. He announced that he would not cross their line. It wasn't long before Golan/Globus signed a union contract, their first ever, and perhaps their only



Figure 19.2 Norman Mailer locks in a shot for *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987). Photo courtesy of Bonnie Barber.

one. This is the man who was Norman Mailer, a guy who would subvert his own movie before he'd betray his crew. As I recall, Tom Luddy did sign a Teamster contract after returning from a walk along the beach with a couple of the tough looking boys from Boston. He seemed blanched, a not unlikely mien for someone taken for a walk by Boston-based goons. Reading the novel again recently, I am reminded of how close the screenplay is to the novel, much dialogue, in fact, lifted intact from the book; predictably, many of the authorial asides had to be omitted. This closely literal adaptation may be one reason the dialogue has sometimes been so satirized. Unlike the demotic dialogue in noir novels of David Goodis, Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammet, Norman's writing has always articulated a heightened reality beyond literal action; his movie dialogue may at times seem closer to theater, with his determinedly American cadences even evoking Elizabethan rhythms. This outright "lifting" of dialogue from novel to script is one reason why certain lines seem to just hang in space rather than land hard, as they should in order to provoke the next speech.

Though criticism of Norman's dialogue has been common, critics often failed to understand that this high blown/trashy blend of poetic simile and gut-bucket profanity is simply ground zero for how Norman perceived the psyches of his cast of mad characters, almost all of whom end up dead at movie's end. Parts of dialogue scenes seem more like declamations than ordinary speech, the most exposed example being the notorious "Oh God, oh man" eruption on the beach when Tim reads Madeline's confessional letter. Whatever operatic, aria-like moment Norman had hoped for here did not happen. Although he later said he came to regret keeping it in the finished film, I'm

not so sure. This scene with its swirling camera movement is a kind of meta-movie moment; it's pure genre driven and old style genre at that. It was not always easy to read Norman's mind, especially when he'd stand next to me at camera and watch the lunacy unfold, his voice a soft cackle as some of the crew looked on, aghast.

How and *if* you perceive Norman's language translating into the physical settings of the movie and to the banter of its scrofulous denizens, is really a clue how you will react to the film itself. Of course, Norman knew exactly what he was doing with this broadly imagistic, even baroque, dialogue that's so richly larded with rotgut obscenity. Juxtaposition of the sacred and profane delighted him. I recall especially the night campfire scene on the Helltown beach between Tim and the effete Wardley (John Bedford Lloyd), a veritable cascade of arch metaphor and profanity as Wardley debates whether to kill Tim or himself, or both of them. Also, Jessica's flashback sex scene with the looming, phallic Provincetown Tower rising in the night sky above her head, while her partner Lonnie Panghorn whines as he watches Tim plough her on his car's hood, elicited stanzas of barely suppressed delight by Norman between takes—as the rest of the crew wondered whether he, along with the movie's characters, had run off the rails and into the dark recesses of Helltown, whose satanic ghosts may have been unleashed by our bright lights.

Norman had a profound belief in the unbridled forces of a dark chaos that had somehow found evil nesting in this curved tip of the continent, and in the tangled Truro woods where Tim stowed his marijuana in a rock covered burrow, and where a short time later he finds one, then a second severed, blond female head. To Norman, the darkest imaginings of madness and murder seemed more than merely possible in this landscape; they seemed inevitable. He often mused on these forebodings to me as we chatted during the halftime break of ABC's *Monday Night Football*, a ritual viewing that Norman hosted every week for the film crew. Since Norman and Norris's Commercial Street home was the principal location for the film, Norman had rented an upper floor apartment in a nearby building; some of the crew, including me and gaffer Michael Moyer, were housed in the same complex. Being off-season there was no dearth of desirable homes to rent. In the summer tourist season they commanded a fortune by the week, but Norman preferred a simple apartment and I chose to be close to him in, as I recall, an apartment just below his.

In an interview when MGM released a new DVD of the film in 2003, Norman gave background about how he came to make the film. He had recently completed his ambitious novel of pharaonic Egypt titled *Ancient Evenings* and he planned to take a year's hiatus from writing. His publisher, however, insisted he deliver another novel per his contract. Norman knew Provincetown, its history and dark mythology like few others, so he decided to quickly write a genre novel of murder and mystery with the town as both location and metaphysical metaphor. It became a very visual novel and Norman soon realized it could be a movie. (The movie bug, 18 years after *Maidstone*, still buzzed around his head.) Producer Tom Luddy put the film deal together at the Cannes Festival. Norman said that writing a novel is "dreary" but directing a film is "fun," a dichotomy that not all movie directors would embrace. There is the added dimension, of course, that given Norman's long history with the Actors Studio Theater he knew and loved the magic unpredictability that actors bring to characters created by the author, even as they are lifted off the written page. Commanding the actors and the shooting crew had a para-military thrill for him; the rigors of a demanding daily shooting schedule was like a call to arms for the old soldier.

In this same DVD interview, Norman credits the actors with all that is successful in the film while laying on himself all that is not. He is also generous to his cinematographer, explaining how we would begin each scene with a thorough discussion of possible camera positions for the "master shot." (All of the subsequent coverage, even though the master shot may have minimal use in the



Figure 19.3 Patty Lariene (Debra Sandlund) and Tim Madden (Ryan O'Neal) reconnect after Madden's stint in jail in *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987). Frame enlargement. Photo courtesy of the Estate of Norman Mailer.

edited scene, came out of insights from that initial discussion.) Sometimes a simple camera move would make standard coverage unnecessary. Norman loved the unexpected way that the camera sliding down the rail track could infuse the whole scene with energy during its shifting perspective. He even grew to be impatient with those static sit-down scenes that dictated normal coverage. He also delighted in dismissing whole elements of the script that he had assiduously re-worked, in favor of some spontaneous idea (a dangerous venture that too often tosses out gold along with dross). “Who’s the idiot who wrote this scene?” was not a surprising quip from him, as we would get boxed in with some non-sequitur dialogue or plot point.

Despite Norman’s history with The Actors Studio and his avowed love for actors, I think he also regarded them as alien creatures. As a writer, he created and controlled his characters; as a movie director, he could find them to be stubbornly resistant to his notes, none more so than Larry Tierney who often abraded him. When Tierney’s boat powered out into the fog to dump the severed heads—then got lost from our view, Norman looked at me with a palpable sense of relief. The irony, of course, is that in some way Tierney’s character, Dougy, embodied the tough talk and homophobia that Norman’s generation saw as markers of true masculinity. It’s easy to judge their overt homophobia from the perspective of our supposed more enlightened time, but I’m not so certain we are always as tolerant as we purport to be.

So, in a truly bizarre scene near the end of the movie Tim and Dougy casually “deep six” from their boat all six bodies, their grim work shrouded in a wide, watery backlit shot by night fog: Patty Lareine, Jessica, Wardley, Regency, Spider, Stoodie—all with actual or intended murder in their hearts, victims of their own misbegotten greed. The only survivors are Dougy, Madeline and Tim.

As Tim carries Madeline, now his wife, over the threshold of their new home, the ghost voices of Helltown erupt in laughter just beyond the closing door.

Much of the film unfolds at night, or in the blueness of magic hour or pinkish dawn. The lambent Cape light dogs many of these scenes. One of them reflects the dying daylight against the dark humor and irony of Wardley's leading Tim at gunpoint across the breakwater rocks out toward Helltown. They have abandoned the car at Pilgrim Landing. Wardley asks Tim, "Is it true the Pilgrims landed here before they went on to Plymouth." Tim says "Yeah," and Wardley looks over to an undistinguished, large, flat building sprawled across the parking lot, pointing his gun there, reflecting, "And now they've built a wonderful motel right on the spot. Only a country as mad as ours could be such a rip-roarin' success." I think this speech and their walk along the rocks, with Wardley firing off a shot into the air in sheer "exuberance," gets to the uneasy heart of the movie. Nominally a noir-esque murder mystery gone awry, the dialogue and the cinematography are anything but "noir." This is a stylistic choice that Norman and I discussed in detail. The predictable and elemental chiaroscuro of film noir black and white imagery as created by lighting masters John Alton and Nick Musuraca did not seem a stylistic fit for us. Color has always been problematic for the noir genre with its Manichean polarities of good/evil. The evil of the *Tough Guys Don't Dance* miscreants is different. They are not the dregs of an urban disaffection. They are educated like Wardley, middle class like Tim, or upwardly striving Southern, like Patty Lareine, characters whose road to perdition becomes a surprise detour from their carefully planned social and financial success.

A non-noir approach to the cinematography seemed appropriate for us, and I proposed ideas to Norman that he readily embraced. The natural, though challenging, beauty of the Provincetown environs and landscape seemed to call for equally beautiful imagery. The title sequence (though it was done as our second unit in post-production) set the tone. Every shot was a static tableau documenting the integration of sea, sand and sky as a terrestrial *paradiso*—albeit a deceptive one that could hide the frenetic and crazed marauding of the movie's cast of killers. The always-latent atmosphere of violence that breaks into the open in the final reels is masked by the movie's pristinely lovely setting, becoming darkly murky only as Tim drives into the Truro woods on the way to retrieve the severed heads.

The lighting of the film studiously avoids the tropes of traditional noir. The light is often soft and open, firelight and tungsten lamps gently flowing across the far walls of the rooms. We made no attempt to create a false sense of danger by the ominous use of hard shadows and dark corners to evoke "mood." Norman and I were convinced that these dark human acts would be even more disturbing if placed in a placid space of clean compositions with inviting warmth and light. There is a flashback scene where Tim and Madeline drive to a wife swap weekend with a North Carolina Christian preacher and his wife. It is where Tim first meets Patty Lareine and where Madeline loses all respect for Tim. We see Penn Jillette as the preacher delivering his Sunday sermon with a callboard of psalms and hymns behind him. It has a kind of "American Gothic" echo but even more, for me, an echo of the unctuous funeral oration given by the preacher at the beginning of *The Big Chill* (1983), a film I had photographed just a few years before.

The night scenes were lit to considerable depth, again with an effort to keep vital a sense of the physical landscape rather than a hermetic sense of Gothic claustrophobia. All this was enhanced by a gently moving camera that seemed to float around the intimate rooms. Much earlier in my career, I had photographed a MOW noirish crime movie that pulled out all the expected tropes of film noir. The finished film was a disappointment; this experience gave me the confidence to suggest to Norman that we subvert the expected style of film noir, just as his languorous, stylized dialogue subverted normal the tough guy staccato tempo of the genre.

I had little interest in the indifferent, even hostile, reviews the film received in its initial release. I don't think any of us, especially Norman, expected it to be a commercial success. But the deeply acrimonious tone and personal invective spewed by many reviewers made it clear to me that something else was afoot. Not everyone, least of all critics, loved Norman or his writing; no writer as outspoken as he, as present in the general political and social discourse of the society, as confrontational in seminars and forums, or as a taunt to some 1970s humorless feminists—could expect to make a movie as open and vulnerable to public judgment (the opening weekend box office being the main arbiter) as Norman Mailer directing a mainstream Hollywood movie. In the early 1990s the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) scheduled an afternoon screening in its Titus I Theater and I went to see it. Several rows in front of me sat Susan Sontag with a small coterie. Her contingent enjoyed loud if forced condescending laughter through much of the screening. I found it demeaning behavior and lost the little remaining respect I had for her—this after her articulate but narrow-sighted book of essays critical of photography, *On Photography*.

The very first film I worked on (as a camera assistant) was *Two Lane Blacktop*. It was also a film that met with near universal disapprobation on its release in 1971. It nearly disappeared for thirty years, then resurfaced as a cult movie, garnered critical reevaluation, and several years ago was inducted into the National Film Preservation Board's annual Registry. Norman Mailer's *Tough Guys Don't Dance* may be far from the best film of its genre or of any genre, its sometimes-creaky self-consciousness all too apparent. But it remains a unique voice in American cinema. The movie's provocative and always commandingly bold tone is that of one of America's great writers. The pity is that despite Norman's stated desire, he was never again able to give voice to his plaint to work as a film director. We are all the poorer for that loss.



Figure 19.4 Norman Mailer and John Bailey A.S.C. during the shooting of *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987) in Provincetown. Photo courtesy of Alicia Alexander.

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Norman Mailer (January 31, 1923 to November 10, 2007) was an American novelist, journalist, essayist, playwright, film-maker, actor, and political activist. His novel *The Naked and the Dead* was published in 1948. His best-known work was widely considered to be *The Executioner's Song* which was published in 1979, and for which he won one of his two Pulitzer Prizes. In addition to the Pulitzer Prize, his book *Armies of the Night* was awarded the National Book Award.

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