AUTHOR, *AUTEUR*: A CONVERSATION WITH NORMAN MAILER

MICHAEL CHAIKEN

IN MAY 2005, AT THE TIME THIS INTERVIEW WAS CONDUCTED, I was working as the Program Director for Film at International House Philadelphia, a non-profit arts center immediately adjacent to the University of Pennsylvania. Earlier that year I had organized a series of films directed by noted authors which included works by Yukio Mishima, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Susan Sontag, William Burroughs, and Samuel Beckett among others. Norman's films were central to the series and, with his consent, we were loaned his personal 35mm prints of *Maidstone* and *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. Around that time I discussed with Norman the possibility of organizing a broader series, one that might include all four of the films he directed in addition to the numerous documentaries made about him: films based on his writing, films in which he appeared as an actor and films that he helped to inspire. I proposed the idea to my colleagues at Film at Lincoln Center in New York and they were intrigued, particularly if Mailer might come to present his films.

This expanded series, which was titled "The Mistress & The Muse: The Films of Norman Mailer" (the cinema being the mistress tempting Norman away from his literary muse), ran for two weeks in July/August 2007 and was divided between two supporting venues in New York, The Anthology Film Archives and Film at Lincoln Center, which opened the series with a double bill of *Maidstone* and *Tough Guys* and concluded the event with Larry Schiller's *The Executioner's Song*, followed by a post-screening discussion with director Larry Schiller, Norris Church Mailer, and Roseanna Arquette. Joined by J. Michael Lennon, film critic and Lincoln Center programmer

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Kent Jones, and me, Mailer took the stage of Lincoln Center on July 22, 2007, in between sold-out screenings of *Tough Guys* and *Maidstone*, in order to take questions from the audience.

In the space of forty-five minutes, Norman managed to eviscerate Jean-Luc Godard as the "second most evil person I'd ever met in my life" (Reagan being the first), greatly offend at least a half dozen members of the audience ('Well, you can find friends… ," was his reply to one woman's generally negative comments on the merits of *Tough Guys*), and unman yours truly after mumbling out my first question ("Chaiken, you have a voice better suited to talking to women at 2 a.m. than asking anybody anything from the stage of Lincoln Center"). Norman also spoke powerfully and eloquently about his years directing films, the pleasure it had brought him, and the seriousness in which he endeavored to make them.

The interview contains many of the themes Norman elaborated on that afternoon in July 2007. It was conducted in Norman's Brooklyn Heights apartment on May 11, 2005. Parts of this interview were included in an article I wrote surveying Norman's directing career for *Film Comment* magazine published in their July/August 2007 issue under the title "The Master's Mercurial Mistress: How Norman Mailer Courted Chaos 24 Frames per Second."

Chaiken: You were a voracious reader as kid. How central was the moviegoing experience for you growing up?

Mailer: Movies were dessert. I used to read and read and read as a child. I remember seeing *Captain Blood* [1935] with Errol Flynn in a movie theater that was 10 blocks away from my home in Brooklyn on one of the coldest winter nights New York ever had. Walking home that night, I got frostbite on my thighs that lasted for a month. My thighs got discolored it was so cold, but it was worth it because that movie was so wonderful. That movie probably gave me more pleasure than any I have ever seen. Put it this way, if a meal at a given time could alter your life—it's not as easy for a dessert to do that. But this dessert did. I think *Captain Blood* affected me permanently. It's a fabulous film.

Chaiken: After *The Naked and the Dead*, you went out to Hollywood. Were there any thoughts back then of possibly giving up writing for a career as a director?

Mailer: I went out there with Jean Malaquais who was already my best friend—or second best friend. We went out there to look around and try to write scripts. My lawyer Cy Rembar, who at the time didn't know a lot about Hollywood, had heard of one agent, a very nice man named George Landy, but he was a minor agent. He didn't have clout. So we hung around and hung around and finally Landy got us a job with Sam Goldwyn to write a script that was supposed to have been based on Nathanael West's *Miss Lonelyhearts*. We got fired about a month after we started working. Deservedly. Then I decided I was going to make a film myself in Hollywood. I was 26 and thought I would first become a famous screenwriter, then a director. We worked and worked and worked to try to get a script going, but simply couldn't. This was the script that was going to make Goldwyn sad that he had fired us. In the end, he was right and we were wrong. The script was dreadful and ultimately never got finished. Malaquais and I, although we remained great friends, simply couldn't work together. So I came back to New York with my metaphorical tail between my legs. Hollywood for me was a failure. A total failure, though I guess what stayed with me was this idea of making movies.

Chaiken: You were one of the editors of Irving Howe's *Dissent* magazine along with Cinema 16 film society founders Amos and Marcia Vogel in the Fifties. Did you attend any of the Cinema 16 screenings?

Mailer: Yeah, I used to go there. That was an interesting place, and I was fascinated with the poetic documentaries Amos used to show. That probably had a lot of influence on me in one way or another. It wasn't that I was totally innocent of documentaries when I started making my own films. It was that I thought that most documentaries were locked into one essential difficulty—that very few people can act when they are playing themselves. I truly believe that half the people alive are natural actors, but when you have to play yourself it really turns you inside out psychologically. It's very unpleasant. If you are playing yourself then you stiffen up. What I found is that practically everyone who is in a documentary who is playing themselves is very stiff. So I got the idea, why not use these techniques? I loved the camera techniques in documentary, particularly that of Pennebaker and the Maysles Brothers, so I thought, "Why not use them for fictional situations?" The cameramen I worked with loved it because they got to try anything. So

yes, I did go to Cinema 16, but don't ask me what films I saw. I do remember seeing Cassavetes and Maya Deren.

Chaiken: Did you know Cassavetes? I'm curious to hear what you make of his films.

Mailer: Cassavetes's work I never really liked. I always thought it was false improvisation. It was semi-improvisation. They knew where the scene was going. My whole feeling was that the one thing you didn't want—the lock I wanted to get out of—is the knowledge of when a scene is coming to an end. Primarily because when a scene comes to an end a skilled actor puts the book down. That's exactly what I wanted to avoid. I wanted to be able to cut to the middle of a scene and swing into another scene. The cutting in *Maidstone* shows that all over the place. Of course, Cassavetes's stuff was much more successful than mine so obviously envy and scorn were intrinsic elements in this, but I felt his stuff was too close to scripted movies.

Chaiken: After Cinema 16 closed, you attended some of Jonas Mekas's screenings at the Filmmaker's Cinematheque.

Mailer: Mekas definitely had an influence. I saw films by Stan Brakhage, Ron Rice, Andy Warhol, Kenneth Anger. Of course, I didn't have a close relationship with any of those guys. We were all simpatico, but casual. We'd see each other at gatherings.

Chaiken: Was Warhol any kind of direct influence?

Mailer: I hated Warhol's work. Hated it. I thought he was on to something, but it wasn't worth it. Although, I thought one of his movies, *Kitchen* [1965], had something in it that was incontestable. If in a hundred years from now they wanted to know what the bottom side of twentieth-century culture was like, all they would have to do was see that movie. The boredom, the aphasia, the apathy, the endlessness of repetitive action, the sense that you don't know where you are going, the vicissitudes of modern drugs were all in that movie. That was damn good, but very hard to look at. See, I didn't like Warhol as an artist. I thought he was the most overrated painter of the twentieth century. However, I thought he was a genius at understanding public taste, which I resented because I certainly had very little skill in that direction.

Chaiken: *Wild 90* was your first film. How did it come about?

Mailer: When my play *The Deer Park* was on at the Theatre de Lys in 1966 and 1967, afterwards Mickey Knox, Buzz Farber, and I, who were my best two friends in the cast, would drink for a couple of hours after the show. We started talking to each other as gangsters and developed these riffs and characters. I was "The Prince," Knox was "Twenty Years," and Farber was "Buzz Cameo." I absolutely loved playing The Prince. All three of us grew up in Brooklyn and Mickey Knox is one of my oldest friends. I met him when I was out in Hollywood in 1949. Buzz came later. Backstage those two were a team. They developed stances that they could play off against one another. Mickey would play off the size of Buzz's nose. And Buzz would play off of Mickey's stinginess and they would keep the dressing room laughing because Buzz was always borrowing Mickey's make up powder. And Mickey would say, "I can't afford it. I can't give up that much powder. Your nose is so fucking big! I have to go out and buy powder everyday!" Then Buzz would say, "You are so fucking stingy.…" So, they would play with each other that way.

Then I got into it. Then the three of us would play these riffs while we were drinking at places like Casey's on 10th Street in the Village around the corner from the Theatre de Lys. Slowly I got the idea this is too good to have fun with. Why don't we film it? Buzz, who worked for CBS, said I know a man named Don Pennebaker, etc., etc. I had seen *Monterey Pop* [1968] and thought the cinematography extraordinary. Pennebaker came in and said for $1,000 he'd film it. He had some film he'd throw in which was unused stock. Not the highest quality he told us, but good enough. So we did that. We started with $1,000 and we filmed for four nights. Don enjoyed it. We had huge fun during the nights we made it. We were drunk. It really was a continuation of the drinking at the bar. We each had enough imagination to assume we were really mafia types hiding out and getting on each others nerves.

That's what we really enjoyed—getting on each other's nerves. We enjoyed the very vanities we could play off that were genuine. For example Buzz, bless his heart he is now long gone, had a lazy streak. So at a certain point he got bored and went to sleep. Although he is the most arresting figure perhaps in the early part of the film, by the end of the film he just about disappeared. He complained and groaned over that and we kept saying, "Well, it's your own fucking fault! You are such a lazy bastard so you went to sleep." Then, of course, Myra Conrad came on and she was marvelous. She was married

to Harold Conrad, who was a publicist for fights. A real shrewd, smart guy. Myra was an understudy for Carol Channing. So she was very good. And Beverly Bentley was very good along with a lot of other people we picked up in passing. So, that again gave me the idea of how well everyone can act. So then I got ambitious with the notion.

Chaiken: Can you elaborate on how you selected the actors for your films?

Mailer: I have this notion that half the people in the world are potential actors. It seems to me that people spend most of their time dissembling what their true feelings are. So, if you can get them to take that one little step in playing someone who is not themselves, they can give you some very interesting results. I always use the example of two businessmen sitting down for a business lunch. They are always pretending to be more or less prosperous than they really are. It's a premise that I still think is valid. If you choose your people with enough instinct, you can get some amazing results. Particularly when the premise is simple. For instance, in *Beyond the Law* I had a notion that everybody alive has a cop and a crook in them. The trick was almost to look at someone and in an instant say "cop or crook." For instance, if I were casting you I'd say, "Well, he could play either." And it could be very interesting.

You could play a stressed-out junkie who would absolutely kill for the next fix or you could play a cop used to infiltrate the junkies. Either way, you would do a wonderful job. So that premise worked beautifully for *Beyond the Law*. With *Maidstone* I ran into trouble because I was dealing with a concept that was not familiar to people. I was asking people to be part of various kinds of CIA groups, and Rat Pack groups, and involved in various kinds of loyalties and treacheries. The fundamental error I made was that most people take it for granted that they are loyal so they have a lot of trouble with treachery. So, what I didn't realize at the time is that I was giving them something that was not going to be easy to play.

Chaiken: In terms of the acting, do you feel *Beyond the Law* is the most successful of the early films?

Mailer: The relative success of *Beyond the Law* all came down to the simple, concise, premise that allowed people who were not actors to suddenly become wonderful actors. Like Eddie Bonetti, who confesses to killing his wife with an ax. I think maybe it's the one true insight I had psychologically

into what enables people to act well. Which is, to go back to it, that everybody has a cop or crook in them. You ask people to play either—most people can do it. People who can't act at all or improvise at all will be able to play a cop or a crook. Very often, more one than the other. Some people—absolutely both. It's just a matter of casting. So I had this marvelous time casting *Beyond the Law*. And it worked. Most of that worked.

Chaiken: The performances in that film are extraordinary.

Mailer: Yeah, really extraordinary. We all went half crazy playing it. Playing a cop brought out a side of me that I didn't even know existed. You remember the guy, the rather delicate fellow in the film, who is furious for being arrested in the men's room for soliciting? Well, he was a good friend of mine who was not gay. He had resolutely gotten married and paid the wages of being married when you really are not altogether happy with the idea of being married. The major passion in his life was not to be perceived as being gay. I didn't warn him in advance about what he was going to be accused of in the film and then suddenly he's in the line up and it became immensely real for him. It was humiliating. The cruelty in me to be willing to do that to a pretty good friend still gives me pause. But the movie took over. The movie is all.

When you are making a movie, the ruthlessness of the movie itself excites your own ruthlessness. It's almost like you are now paying abeyance to a Dionysian God—that what is important absolutely is the expression of the work at all costs. Whatever it takes. So I remember I'm interrogating him, scolding him, overbearing as Lt. Francis X. Pope and he is getting furious. So at a given movement he starts touching me. This was such a violation of police procedure that I took off my hat and I was going to hit him. I was going to pistol-whip him with the hat. At which point he realized how angry I was and he backed off a little. That these sort of emotions came out, the sort of emotions that actors will work very often for three weeks of rehearsal in order to be able to tap, were coming out immediately made me immensely ambitious about the possibility of improvised film. What I didn't understand is that I had lucked into a fundamental premise and this premise worked for that film. In fact, the film was good enough, in its own small way, to be at Lincoln Center at the New York Film Festival. I must say, the end of it gets a little lame—a little soft. I was expecting a lot of cheers and instead I got a lot of boos. I was learning about film audiences. Anyways, all of this excited me to try something very ambitious—*Maidstone*.

Chaiken: Before we get into *Maidstone*, there is a second version of *Beyond the Law*. Could we talk about that?

Mailer: Yeah, *Beyond the Law (Blue)*. We could talk about it, but nobody is ever going to see it. It exists, but I think I got it under lock and key. It was my venture into porny. I'll tell you the reason why it can't be shown. My role in it is routine. In other words, I could be hired as one of the backups for a porny movie. Believe me I wasn't a porny star in the film, but adequate. The thing is, there is a girl in it who let herself be used in that film and I don't think.… She was a reasonably good, middle-class, girl. And really, I can't show that film.

Chaiken: Does it go deeper into the wicked double life of the cops?

Mailer: Well, Pope ends up killing this girl. I decided that after the boos at Lincoln Center we needed more at the end of it. That it was too soft and sentimental. So he goes off and he sees a girl he knows and he screws her. This is Pope and the other cop played by Mickey Knox. So we both screw the girl. I'm alone with her at the end and I go crazy and kill her. You don't literally see the killing. What you see is blood all over the sheets and her dead.

Chaiken: This version was never shown?

Mailer: Never. I was going to show it publicly, but I felt I had crossed the line and that people's lives were going to be changed profoundly if it were shown. People who had trusted me. It was the Sixties afterall. We were ready to do anything, but then I realized afterward that in crossing that line, unless it was great art … and this wasn't great art it was a fairly interesting porny film.… People's lives were gonna be absolutely affected by it. Possibly ruined and years were gonna be spent talking about it. So I buried it. I wish I could put a sticker on it: "Fifty years after I'm gone—take it out of the well."

Chaiken: Around this time you were in two *vérité* documentaries, both directed by Dick Fontaine, *Will the Real Norman Mailer Please Stand Up?* [1968] and *Norman Mailer vs. Fun City, USA* [1970]. Did either of these experiences inform the way you worked with your actors?

Mailer: Dick was an extraordinarily deft documentarian. He was sort of like Zelig. He'd pop up at the most incredible moments with his crew. For instance, I'd be arrested at the Pentagon and thrown into a bus. There was

Dick. I'd get out of jail. There was Dick. I ended up with a huge respect for the ability that a documentarian needs. They need all the skills of a top cameraman, all the skills of a top investigative report and all the skills of a "Johnny on the Spot" reporter. Dick had all of these. For me, though, being in these kinds of things is never easy. At a certain point you go into overdrive and you feel something ugly in your ego functioning. You are selling something you don't quite believe in. Why? To keep the movie moving and to keep it interesting so you aren't a bore like other people you see in documentaries. The moment you are playing yourself you're phony. If you want to know what you are like—play a part. Play enough parts and you'll get some sense of where your center is.

Chaiken: Was *Maidstone* conceived immediately after the assassination of Robert Kennedy or had you been thinking of making the film before that?

Mailer: The assassination of Bobby Kennedy unmanned me. I remember shrieking into the phone "No! No!" I immediately thought "I gotta make this movie." I decided to take on the premise of a man who had made semi-pornographic films—exotic films—who had decided to run for president despite all. He had a group supporting him called The Cashbox who were sort of like Sinatra's Rat Pack. Then you had this other organization called PAXC, The Prevention of Assassination Experiment Control, and it's unclear whether they are there to protect him or assassinate him. This was the basic premise. So, I set up these groups and I had some very intelligent people working in PAXC and some fairly tough guys working in The Cashbox. Anyway, the idea was we'd descend on Long Island. I think it was the only time in my life where I could of sold a project like that. I'm not an impresario, but I was for a couple of weeks there in 1968. To my amazement, with some help from some other people, I got Bobby Gardiner to agree to give us his island. I got Barney Rossett to agree to give us his estate for shooting. There is a woman named Elizabeth Brackman who agreed to let us use her house. And then Alfonso Ossorio allowed us to use his extraordinary mansion. So we worked from mansion to estate back to another mansion to an island.

Chaiken: How did you cast the film?

Mailer: I interviewed maybe 20 fairly good-looking young women who were not actresses, and I ended up using all of them because they were all some-

what interesting. The year before, I had seen a director casting an actress for a play of mine and he was terribly cruel to her. He said to her, "Well if you want to go anywhere in your career you are going to have to have a nose job." She was a lovely girl, but this shattered her. That stayed with me. I didn't know much about other directors. In fact, I hardly knew any of them. So I thought that's how directors act. There was something always very simple in me when I was making these movies. Like an innocent youth—a character out of Goethe in an odd way. The world is there. The only way we learn anything about it is by exploring. So, I decided to play a very mean director. Of course, in *Maidstone* all the interviews are with women and each is crueler than the next. I paid for that for 40 years. The women's movement picked it up as if it were manna from heaven. They had found their number-one sexist pig in America. *Maidstone* came out in 1971. It couldn't have had better timing. It went absolutely into the cavern's mouth of the Women's Liberation Movement.

Chaiken: I got the sense that the interrogation of the actresses was some kind of riff on the casting couch in Hollywood.

Mailer: Sure, we all knew about the casting couch in Hollywood. We all knew the story about Marilyn Monroe signing a certain big contract and saying, "That's the last cock I will ever suck." We all heard that. Whether true or not—we had all heard that. So I took it for granted that the cruelty was immense. And I think I was right. But the point was—the acting was too good. I was too good an actor at that point. I was convincing as that kind of director and everybody thought, "That's him. That's who he is." Analogous to this, I remember when Warren Beatty played Bugsy. Afterward I was interviewing him and I said, "Aren't you a little bit concerned that some of your friends will be nervous about you now?" He said, "No, my friends are all actors and they know that all you need to play a part is to have 5 percent of it in your character." Then he grins and says, "Of course, if you got 75 percent it's a big help. But all you need is 5 percent." I had that 5 percent and I used it. I've been paying for it ever since.

Chaiken: How much footage was shot on *Maidstone*?

Mailer: On *Maidstone* we shot 45 hours of sound and film, but only seven hours of that was remotely usable. The 45 hours consisted mainly of people repeating what I told them about the plot. It was just awful. I think if Rip

hadn't hit me over the head with a hammer I would have been in a whole series of explanations at the end of the film about why the film did not work. That was my fail-safe. I figured I'd make this film and if it doesn't work there will be some very interesting dialogue about why it doesn't work.

Chaiken: The attack by Rip Torn at the end certainly raises some interesting moral questions.

Mailer: Oh boy! Especially when your kids are there. They were kind of marked by it. It's something they go back to over and over. Rip and I made up a long time ago.

Chaiken: Immediately after the attack you tell Rip in the film that none of it was going to end up in the movie. What made you change your mind?

Mailer: When I saw it, I realized I had to put it in. It was just too damn good. I hated it, but I felt I had to put it in. Rip was right. I was making a movie about assassination. How could I not have an assassination in it?

Chaiken: Did you feel afterwards that Don [D.A. Pennebaker] had any kind of obligation to put the camera down and intervene?

Mailer: [*Mishearing the question*] I always assume God to be much too occupied. I see God as a tired general.

Chaiken: No, not God. Don. D.A. Pennebaker.

Mailer: Oh! Boy, I thought we really getting into top gear fast. I think Don was bothered by it. I remember afterwards I was furious with him and I went up to him and said, "Well, would you photograph my last gasps?" He had a work ethic just as I did and we discovered that his work ethic and mine had nothing to do with one another. At that point my work ethic was, the film's over, let's congratulate the director. His work ethic is finding a scene so he stayed with the scene. On balance, he may have been right. I think he probably would have intervened at some point, but it would have been way down the road. I can guarantee it. In any event, Beverly Bentley intervened so that was that!

Chaiken: *Maidstone* took a long time to edit. How many different edits were there of the film before you decided on its final version?

Mailer: I can enumerate them. There was a totally hopeless $7\frac{1}{2}$ hour version that was edited down from the 45 hours. It took us three weeks just to see the rushes from the 45 hours. Then it took about a half year to arrive at the $7\frac{1}{2}$ hours. We worked on the $7\frac{1}{2}$ hours for a long time before we were able to get it down to about $3\frac{1}{2}$ hours. At that point, down from $7\frac{1}{2}$ hours, it's a totally different film. It was endlessly long and slow and had all sorts of interesting corners, pursued all sorts of angles, that never quite got developed enough.

Chaiken: Does that version still exist?

Mailer: No, I don't think so. I remember with the $3\frac{1}{2}$ hour version most people who saw it in advance groupings tended to leave the theater before the film was finished. A few people—mainly French movie intellectuals—came up to me afterwards and said that it was one of the finest movies they'd ever seen. *Maidstone* has that polarizing quality. If you were able to stand $3\frac{1}{2}$ hours it was a very interesting film—perhaps more interesting than the final result. But it was still much too long. So we started cutting it down. We got it to a pretty good version at $2\frac{1}{2}$ hours and another reasonably good version at about $2\frac{1}{4}$ hours.

Then we started trying to find a market for it. Sam Cohn, our agent at the time, loved the film and wanted to show it to United Artists who owed him a favor. Sam came back to me and told us that the top guy at UA had turned it down. When I asked him why, Sam was fuming and said, "The top guy wanted to show it to his second and the second really didn't like it." So I said, "Well, he's Number One. Why is he listening to his second?" Sam looked at me like I was an idiot and says, "Hey—the Number Two man hated the fucking thing!" I learned a great lesson that day. The Number One man will never go against the Number Two man because he has nothing to gain by going against him. If the Number Two man is right—then the Number One man will never forgive him and become threatened. If he's wrong, he's very happy that the Number Two man made a mistake and the power balance is maintained. The Number One man never goes against the Number Two man. This is part of the fatherly wisdom I'm always offering my children. Always, seduce the attention of the Number Two man.

Chaiken: Sage advice. So how did the final edit come about?

Mailer: Right. So people kept telling me that I had to get down to 90 minutes if I wanted to find a distributor. I finally saw a way to redo it entirely

with a totally different kind of editing. I essentially made the movie twice. The first time through I edited it one way; the second time, what ultimately became the final version, is like the director's dream where the undercurrents of all the scenes are shown. I was fascinated with that and I loved the idea. So we did it that way. For a lot of people it's too much of a chopped-up production and too difficult to follow. It really is much better the second, third, and fourth time you see it.

We previewed this version at the Whitney Museum of American Art. They broke records with it. They used to have a hundred-seat theater where they'd show a movie twice a day. For a hit film they'd have 200 people. With this one they went up to five showings a day for two weeks. Seven thousand people came to see it. After it was over I was really excited. It had broken all house records at the Whitney, so I said, "Well, I still have a little money left…." I always financed these movies myself and I was riding a surplus at that time, but by now I had gotten down to the end of that surplus. So, all right—I'll take the last $20,000 and we'll open it at a theater. We opened it someplace called the Lincoln something or other on 57th Street. For seven days, they did the worst business in their history. I couldn't understand it. Why the best and the worst? I was talking to somebody who knew a lot about film and he said to me, "Norman, the answer is that there were just 7,000 people in New York who were interested in seeing that film." And that was it. The end. We never got the one great review we were hoping for.

Chaiken: After *Maidstone* were there other film projects you had in mind or did the reception sour you to making more films?

Mailer: It didn't sour me as much as it wiped me out. I would've done as well to have bought a yacht, taken it out to harbor and sunk it. At that point all my money was gone. I entered into years after *Maidstone* where I was always playing catch up to pay my income tax. I would've loved to have made more movies. Two things had happened. I had no more money and I didn't want to go out to scout for money. I just thought I wasn't going to be good at it. I also lost the impetus. I no longer felt that I've got a way to make movies that would turn the movie industry inside out. I recognized that to make movies the way I wanted to make them you had to be totally devoted to improvisation all of your life. You had to develop a crew of actors who could work with it and work with it and know the demands of improvisation—each of

them developing their own specific, personal genius. I wasn't prepared to do that. Ultimately, I wanted to be a writer rather than a movie director. I think it's one of the reasons that I made *Tough Guys Don't Dance* [1987] many years later. I wanted to see what the other side of the fence was like. I must say, I enjoyed it immensely. It was very hard work, but I had very good people I was working with. It was fun to work with that kind of dialogue, but a much different kind of film from the earlier ones.

Chaiken: There's a growing mystique around your films because they've become so very difficult to see.

Mailer: That's probably part of it. On the other hand, I like to think that if they were easier to see they might still have a little vogue. I think they are crazy pictures. Crazy from the point of view of people who come to them cold. They have so many interesting virtues and faults. I made them with immense enthusiasm, a manic enthusiasm, with very little knowledge of the exceptionally stern demands of film. I was aided and abetted by a couple of wild men who nonetheless were very good cameraman—Ricky Leacock and Don Pennebaker. Though, I suppose, you can hardly call Ricky Leacock a madman. He's almost classical in his style of photography. Pennebaker was always wilder. I remember one time he literally got under a glass table to shoot a scene from underneath. He was always looking for the angle that no one else had ever thought of. Leacock always had everything well framed and beautifully composed.

Anyway, the falsehood was that I felt I had discovered something brand-new. It was the only time in my life where I felt like Marco Polo. What I didn't understand was the immense limitations of improvisation unless you spend your life at it. I must say, once I started making films, with the exception of the more exciting years of my personal life, it was the most exciting stuff I ever did. I loved making movies. I've used this image over and over again, but 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, the bravery you have to develop if you don't have it already. Immediately you are a general. People treat you like a general when you are a director. The best part of it is, there is very little blood.