COMMANDO RAIDS ON THE NATURE OF REALITY

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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 theatre 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* (1943), 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

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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 *Poitín* (1979) and the Coen Brother's *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* (1919) to *Citizen Kane* (1941) and *Á Bout de soufflé* (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, then, *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 ("Course" 232). Mailer's essay "A Course on Film-Making," published in the *New American Review* in 1971, described his theory behind shooting *Maidstone*. A slightly different version of the essay appeared 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" ("Course" 201). 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 filmmaking 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 (Jean Campbell) could be a member of an organization that inadvertantly 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). Kinglsey purports to have them under control, but they are clearly a dangerous group. The film director's life is plainly at risk.

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, and the owner of the Maidstone estate 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 (Mailer, *Maidstone* 16).

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 verité* 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 performing oral 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" ("Course" 202). It was "pure cinema," a "prime example of the logic of film" (232). 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 (217).

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. Kinglsey'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 verité* 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 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" (231). *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" (226). 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 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" ("Course" 239). 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 a singer 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 (201). 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 Raoul 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," Raoul/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" ("Course" 238). 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" (201).

Perhaps that was the case. But it is just as possible that including the scene moved Mailer closer to the kind of filmmaking 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 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 sixties and seventies. 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 verité*, but remains skeptical of it all the same. Let us not forget that, in his essay "A Course in Filmmaking," 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 become 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 the 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. (239)

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/Raoul 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 filmmaking 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* (1974), 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 phoneys, whereas Mailer had pursued something quite different.

Mailer concluded his essay "A Course in Film-Making" by suggesting that he was mining for "the ineluctable ore of the authentic" (241). 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.

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