REINVENTING A NEW WHEEL: THE FILMS OF NORMAN MAILER

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YEARS AGO, I MET SOMEONE WHO HAD MADE A DOCUMENTARY FILM called *How Much Paint Does a Painting Need?* What a great title. It not only stuck in my memory, but it dovetailed with questions that have plagued me for years about the history of cinema, and, more particularly, the cinema's history of itself.

Consider, for example, Francois Truffaut's remark that he liked Hollywood films because they were so similar to one another. Despite technological changes, aesthetic evolutions, and generic boundaries, it is easy to argue that Hollywood films always have more in common with one another than they have differences. By extension, the same could be said of all narrative cinema, whenever and wherever it is produced.

Mikhail Bakhtin once referred to the novel as a genre (3–40). Foregoing my early devotion to auteur theory and the uniqueness of particular film directors, I might well be led to a similar conclusion about the cinema, at least on some days of the week.

In years past, I have given many lectures on the importance of modern filmmakers recognizing and understanding film history. So many films have been produced over the last 120-odd years that they constitute not merely a well or a reservoir from which to draw, but oceanic depths of ideas and approaches to consider and understand. I believed those words as I spoke them, and most of the time I still do. I am both a film historian and a filmmaker, so I probably have little choice in the matter.

After all, the best film education is viewing films, and viewing them repeatedly. Orson Welles did just that with Ford's *Stagecoach* (1939) before he directed *Citizen Kane* (1941). Over six decades later, a graduating film student

THE MAILER REVIEW, VOL. 5, NO. 1, FALL 2011. Copyright © 2011. The Norman Mailer Society. Published by The Norman Mailer Society.

that I knew—one who was highly astute and very talented—told a university program director that he believed the money he spent on tuition would have more wisely been used to purchase the entire Criterion Collection on DVD. The program director did not appreciate or understand his argument but, well, that is hardly surprising. Most of the stupidest people I've ever met have the letters "PhD" after their names.

At any rate, let's come to the point and make sense of these random thoughts. Let's ask a question that—in the tradition of the very best questions—probably has no answer: *How much film history does a film need?*

I like being winked at, whether in a pub or at a movie theatre. Filmmakers have often winked at film buffs over the years, providing allusions in their films to earlier films. Appropriation becomes homage. We are part of the game of film history, the repurposing of some particular character name or line of dialogue. During the lengthy crane shot in *The Player* (1992), we know that Altman is thinking about *Touch of Evil* (1958) and that, in turn, he knows that those of us "in the know" will be thinking about it as well.

In the past two decades, the environmentally conscious state of California's most financially successful recycling project has been the Hollywood remake. Old television programs into movies (the *Beverly Hillbillies* ride again). Old movies into movies (there is more than one ticket on the *3:10 to Yuma*). And even old movie genres into modern movie genres (The 1970s horror film is the horror film of today). These examples brim with film history. And then the cup overfloweth; it spills onto the floor with maybe little more than instant coffee from a cheap vending machine. In other words, we might also ask if a film has *too much* film history?

As fascinating and as maddening as these questions of film history are to me, I do know whether they held much interest for Norman Mailer. As a writer, Mailer towered over the twentieth century. That he is not more studied in Departments of English at American universities is to their discredit, not his. But I suspect that his novels will outlast his critics. They already have a good track record in that regard.

Mailer's film career is another matter. Cinematic adaptations of his literature began with *The Naked and the Dead* (1958), and continued with such films as *See You in Hell, Darling* (1966), *Marilyn: The Untold Story* (1980), and *The Executioner's Song* (1982). But then there is also the quartet of films that Mailer directed over a period of two decades: *Wild 90* (1968), *Beyond the Law* (1968), *Maidstone* (1970), and *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987). At the

time of this writing, the first three are not available on DVD in the United States.

Tough Guys Don't Dance is readily available, as are its many bad reviews. In fact, it is easier to find to negative reviews of all of Mailer's films than worthwhile analyses of them. "Not the most wretched movie ever made, but close," so claims one *Maidstone* viewer on the erstwhile *Internet Movie Database*, that regularly inaccurate online encyclopedia which doubles as a commercial for Amazon.com ("Maidstone"). Of *Beyond the Law*, another amateur reviewer tells us it is "a vanity project of the most arrogant sort" ("Beyond the Law").

But enough of self-anointed internet critics. Their ease of accessibility on the World Wide Web is matched by their equally limited depth and shelf life. And judgments of what is "good" and "bad" are all-too-often opinions that say as much about the persons who offer them as they do about the work of art under consideration. Instead of ill-formed posts on the internet, Mailer's four films need something else. They need to be reclaimed by film historians, because, while they have held a place in Mailer's biography, they have usually been ignored in tales of the cinema.

The first three of Mailer's films bear a great deal of commonality to one another, but—at least in his mind—little resemblance to most, if not all, of the films that preceded them. Recounting the production of *Wild 90*, he claimed, "We got the idea we would do fiction in documentary form" (*Wild 90*). The specific documentary form he had in mind was direct cinema as practiced by D. A. Pennebaker, who had directed *Don't Look Back* in 1967 and *Monterey Pop* in 1968, a film that Mailer greatly admired. Pennebaker shot *Wild 90*, which came—as the film's credits tell us—"from a script which did not necessarily exist." Pennebaker also later worked as one of the cinematographers on *Beyond the Law* and *Maidstone*.

Mailer later admitted that *Wild 90* was "tremendously amateurish," but he was also firm in his belief that there were "elements in it that . . . were different from all the movies" he had ever seen (*Wild 90*). "Together with all the rough hewn sloppiness of the film," he said, "there was also in it something vital that I liked" (*Wild 90*). It was that same kind of vitality that he tried to explore in *Beyond the Law* and *Maidstone*. As he claimed onscreen during a scene in *Maidstone*, "We made a movie by a brand new process."

In his published essay "A Course in Film-Making," which was ostensibly about the production of *Maidstone*, Mailer modulated his position. He noted

that he was not the first to "do fiction in documentary form" ("A Course" 217). Some person or group of persons had evidently brought this fact to his attention. Various filmmakers had worked without scripts, including the likes of Charlie Chaplin. The faking of non-fiction footage had long roots, ranging from the early cinema period (with its fabricated images of the Spanish-American War and famous boxing matches) to newsreels of the thirties (as lampooned in MGM's 1938 feature *Too Hot to Handle* with Clark Gable). And fictional films like *Citizen Kane* (1941) had employed documentary film aesthetics nearly three decades before *Wild 90*.

In some respects, John Cassavetes' *Shadows* (1959) was a particularly important link to the chain that led to Mailer's first three films. Shot on location in New York with an improvised story, the fictional film exemplifies the kind of raw and authentic vitality that Mailer would seek a decade later. However, Mailer's visual style would be quite different than Cassavetes' style.

Mailer's departure from all of these earlier examples came in part due to his embrace of direct cinema. Handheld camera and existing lighting mark his first three films. While Pennebaker and others had already made direct cinema documentaries, they were still exploring its possibilities when Mailer began his filmmaking career. He directed *Wild 90* and *Beyond the Law* in 1968, the same year that the Maysles Brothers completed *Salesman* (1968). Two years later, Mailer finished *Maidstone* at roughly the same time that the Maysles Brothers finished *Gimme Shelter* (1970).

In other words, rather than simply being inspired by a movement that had stopped moving, Mailer conducted his own fictional experiments while direct cinema was the prevailing force in documentary film. His films not only appropriated then-recent film history, but also engaged in a conversation with the unfolding present. Perhaps that is why, as Mailer tells us in "A Course in Filmmaking," his ideas were a "conception which was more or less his own, and he did not feel the desire to argue about it" (217). Put another way, he did not believe his films incorporated very much film history.

Of Mailer's first three films, the inaugural *Wild 90* is the most austere. Onscreen text informs us, "Once three guys from Brooklyn were hold up in a room and couldn't get out for various vague reasons." These guys, who are "Maf Boys," have already spent 21 days in that location when we meet them. One is Prince, played by Mailer. Another is Buzz Cameo, who shares his first name with Buzz Farber, the actor who portrayed him. The third is Mickey (aka, "20 Years"), who also bore the same first name as the man who assumed

the role: Mickey Knox, the only one of the three who was a professional film actor.

The trio pass the time by talking, by arguing, by fighting. "If you ever find yourself in shit, don't sing," Mickey tells them, giving sage advice to the room's prisoners. But they are not always alone. An array of guests visit the apartment, ranging from Mickey's wife to a "bunch of bulls" who speculate that at least one of the three wouldn't survive if he left the room. Someone wants to kill him (or them), and it isn't the police, at least not the officers in the scene.

We have no idea how long we are in the room with the trio. Ranging from the nickelodeon era to the present, onscreen titles in films have usually been pedagogical. They teach us information we need to understand film narratives. In *Wild 90*, a repeated use of the same title cards tells us "Another Day" and then "Another Night." We see these six times, but their appearances are spaced so randomly throughout the film it is difficult to trust them, or even—as a first-time view—to count them.

To a degree, time has lost its meaning. Like the characters, we the observers become lost in the relentless monotony of living in a single location. *Wild 90* is boring, perhaps excruciatingly so, but in a manner that the Italian neo-realists would likely have appreciated. We share the boredom of the main characters. We experience the meaningless activities and trite conversation of criminals who, since they are not committing crimes, are in fact very dull, just like so much of everyday life.

Acting styles in the film vary from Hollywood norms (Knox) to the forced and exaggerated (Mailer). Together, they draw constant attention to the fact that what we are seeing is fictional, but that realization collides with the film's aesthetics, which suggest that what we are seeing is genuine. Some of this is due to the handheld camera; some of it due to the use of imperfect audio and existing lighting. At one point, for example, we see a light bulb shadow on Cameo's head. It is distractingly authentic.

Paranoia reigns as Mickey repeatedly worries about the lights in an adjacent building; he believes that they are being observed from afar. And indeed they are, but not by rival gangsters or by the authorities. A film camera watches them. Prince acknowledges that fact at the film's conclusion, when he looks directly into the lens and says, "Goodnight," thus violating a longstanding Hollywood taboo. The observed has become the observer. It is in that moment that Mailer best captures the tension between fiction and nonfiction filmmaking.

Shortly after completing *Wild 90*, Mailer wrote and directed *Beyond the Law*. In it, he plays Pope, a police lieutenant; his acting style is much more restrained than in *Wild 90*. Once again, he cast a combination of professionals and amateurs. Rip Torn notably appears as Popcorn. Mickey Knox (as Mickey Burke) and Buzz Farber return. Farber plays "Rocco Gibraltar," a character name that highlights the film's fictional roots.

Once again Mailer plays with onscreen titles. A series of different title cards tell us that *Beyond the Law* is a film with various alternate titles, perhaps more than any other in film history. The blank spaces below indicate the numerous changes of title cards:

BEYOND THE LAW

alias

BUST 80

ALIAS
GIBRALTAR, BURKE AND POPE

alias
COPPING THE WHIP

or
A Fantasy

of the Angels,

The Downtrodden

And The Dispossessed

otherwise known as

THE VELVET HAND
and
THE IRON TONGUE

The fact that one of these title cards uses the very word "fantasy" indicates from the outset that the film is a fiction, but collectively the title cards suggest that it is a fiction drawn from the factual: an opaque background on the titles ever so slowly reveals an image of a New York skyline.

Beyond the Law's structure departs from the purely observational. The entire film takes place in one long night, with most of its running time devoted to a police line-up and the grilling of individual crooks who range from murderers to a man arrested for soliciting a "young boy." But all of those scenes are merely flashbacks. The film begins with two of the policemen (Rocco and Mickey) on a double date. They review what has just happened at the police station; later in the film, Pope joins them. The result allows for a multiple locations, both within the police station and without.

Direct cinema guides the shooting and editing style. Handheld camera shots unfold in long takes, occasional zooms, and jump cuts. Camera glare also invokes the appearance of authenticity. Mailer allows for a great deal of overlapping dialogue, as well as—during the police interviews—the intrusion of offscreen voices (and shouts) from elsewhere in the police station. But here we also feel the presence of a director more than in *Wild 90*. For example, at the line-up, the handheld camera situates its point of view over the shoulder of Mailer, who is neatly silhouetted on screen left. Such composition hardly suggests the random.

Other aspects of the cinematic style repeatedly remind us that *Beyond the Law* is a "fantasy." Music is used more prodigiously than in *Wild 90*, punctuating important moments of action, such as when a cop pushes a crook down a hallway and threatens him with a police baton. And then there are numerous different wipe transitions, ranging from one that looks like a splash of paint to another that resembles a car's windshield wiper. Once again, it is as if fiction and non-fiction wrestle in a cinematic competition.

If *Wild 90* is little more than a record of three men trapped in a room, *Beyond the Law* attempts to convey a clear theme. All of the horrible things that crooks do are matched, at least to a degree, by all of the horrible things that the police do. "There is no police brutality in this precinct," one cop ironically tells a criminal while roughing him up. The mayor (George Plimpton) calls Pope "sadistic," and Pope himself announces that it is "time to become corrupt" when he meets a woman at a restaurant who has earlier been arrested for taking part in an S&M party.

Beyond the Law ends with Lieutenant Pope, Mickey Burke, and Rocco

Gibraltar staring into the camera. Like *Wild 90*, the taboo is violated, but here it is more pronounced. Three characters acknowledge us, the audience who has been staring at them.

For Mailer, the complicated interplay between documentary film aesthetics and fictional film narratives culminated in his third film, *Maidstone*. Much as Oliver Stone's work with fact and fiction (as in his use of mixed media and what he termed "vertical editing") moved from *JFK* (1991) through *Natural Born Killers* (1994) to *Nixon* (1995), so too did Mailer's interest in filming "fiction in documentary form" move from experimentation to mastery.

Using no written script, *Maidstone* tells the story of famous film director Norman T. Kingsley (Mailer), who considers a run for the presidency even while he begins production on a new movie set in a bordello. Various persons plot against him, ranging from a number of "high officials" to the "Cashbox," a group of Kingsley's cronies headed by his half brother Raoul Rey O'Houlihan (Rip Torn). Kingsley's assassination seems inevitable, but it never happens.

Once again, Mailer combined professional actors (Ultra Violet and Hervé Villechaize) and amateurs (including two of his ex-wives and his then-current wife, as well as the owner of the Maidstone estate where the film was shot). He also drew upon cast members from his prior films, including Rip Torn, Buzz Farber, Mara Lynn (from *Wild 90*), Peter Rosoff (from *Beyond the Law*), and Beverly Bentley (*Beyond the Law* and *Wild 90*).

For much of its running time, *Maidstone* relies upon direct cinema. A failed attempt on Kingsley's life all too readily recalls the assassination of Bobby Kennedy. At the same time, the film's editing occasionally drifts into experimentation. Some footage appears to be repeated, but under scrutiny, it becomes apparent that Mailer gives us more than one take of the same shot, placing pressure on us to consider whether or not any are "real." Title cards divide the film into sections, though they also place some strain on our memory. Each is numbered, though curiously only one of them (*EIGHT: Return of an Old Love*) spells out the number.

Section 9: The Death of a Director intercuts images of nudity and sex with shots of animal bones and Kingsley laying on the ground, as if he has been murdered. The section also features Jeanne Cardigan licking a microphone before smearing a baby doll (and then herself) with what appears to be

blood. Here *Maidstone* aligns itself more with the avant-garde movement of the sixties than it does with any documentary film tradition.

Whereas Mailer's earlier films only allowed actors to acknowledge the camera as their narratives concluded, *Maidstone*'s ostensible plotline ends with *10: The Grand Assassination Ball*, but two more sections follow. *11: A Course in Orientation* features Mailer (not playing Kingsley, but rather playing Mailer the film director) explaining the process by which he made the film to its cast and crew, some of whom voice disappointment that the narrative drive towards Kingsley's assassination was all for naught.

And then, famously, there is *12: The Silences of an Afternoon*. In it, Rip Torn – disappointed by the lack of an assassination in the film's narrative—makes an apparently unexpected attack on "Not Mailer," but on "Kingsley." After announcing that he "must die," Rey/Torn twice hits Mailer/Kingsley with a hammer over the head. The two struggle with each other until falling onto the ground. Mailer bites Torn's ear, drawing blood. They grab at each other's necks, with Torn gaining an upper hand just as Mailer's wife and children arrive.

Even if (at first, at least) it is Rey the film character attempting to assassinate Kingsley the film character, it is also Mailer the man (no longer Kingsley and perhaps no longer the film director) who struggles with Torn, an actor who has seemingly run amok. But here my description is admittedly simplistic, as their roles could have reconstituted themselves repeatedly during the apparently spontaneous and authentic encounter.

"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" ("A Course" 238). Onscreen, the attack and struggle lasts roughly two minutes, with another six minutes covering Torn and Mailer's ensuing and heated conversation.

The fight scene gave Mailer "a whole new conception of his movie." He believed that his filmmaking process had created a "presence" that outlived the conclusion his original storyline and what had only *seemed* to be the end of the shoot. It was an event that took *Maidstone* closer to the "possible real nature of film" (Mailer, "A Course" 238).

And perhaps closer to real the nature of the filmmaking process. After all,

those eight tense minutes between Mailer/Kingsley and Rip/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.

After *Nixon*, Oliver Stone largely eschewed his work with mixed media and vertical editing, opting instead to return to more traditional Hollywood filmmaking in films like *U Turn* (1997) and *Any Given Sunday* (1999). Stone's choice was as inevitable as it was regrettable. Mailer did the same after *Maidstone*. His only other directorial effort came in *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987) with Ryan O'Neal and Isabella Rossellini. To employ the much overused phrase, the film represents another side of the Mailer coin. And, as a big budget film featuring star performers, it represents the obverse side of that coin. It does not employ direct cinema and does not attempt to convey fiction through any kind of documentary film form. In appearance, it aesthetically smacks similar to many typical Hollywood films of 1987, including Oliver Stone's *Wall Street*.

One brand of film history would tell us that this approach is a bad idea, at least if a director hopes to be dubbed an auteur. John Huston, notably overlooked by adherents to auteur orthodoxy, once remarked that he could find no more similarity between his films than he could between his wives: they all seemed different to him. Likewise, *Tough Guys Don't Dance* bears little resemblance to Mailer's earlier films.

Critics have not generally been kind. Mailer's complicated tale of lust of murder combines with a style of direction that pushed the actors to a level of heightened exaggeration. In some ways, *Tough Guys Don't Dance* could fit within David Lynch's canon, but in his hands it still would have been more restrained. Perhaps there is a subtle intrusion of film history, as *Tough Guys* also smacks similar to a number of exploitation films of the sixties and seventies, such as those directed by Russ Meyer. However, Meyer's world never featured storylines as complicated as Mailer's.

Does Mailer push things to the edge, or does he (and his actors) fall over the cliff and explode in the canyon below? Viewers will differ on this point, as well as on whether careening off the cinematic road is necessarily a bad thing. At any rate, such a conversation drifts into the realm of opinion, and opinions should not conceal the kind of important experimentation at work in *Tough Guys*.

The art of adaptation is much studied. So many books and essays (and, for that matter, entire journals) have concentrated on the rather common

practice of one author adapting the work of another—the Book-into-the-Film. However, self- (or "auto-") adaptation is rare, particularly in Hollywood with a writer of Mailer's stature. For *Tough Guys*, Mailer (with uncredited assistance from Robert Towne) translated his own novel into his own script and, finally—given his role as director—his own film.

Even well planned experiments yield unexpected results. Nowhere is the gulf between written word and live performance more evident than in Ryan O'Neal's infamous performance of Tim Madden, particularly when he learns his wife has been unfaithful. Standing on a bluff at the ocean, he cries out to himself: "Oh, Man! Oh, God! Oh, Man! Oh, God! Oh, Man! Oh, God! Oh, Man! Oh, God! Oh, Man! Oh, God!" On paper the words not only reveal the intensity of a moment, but they also operate on more than one level. These are two exclamations common to everyday speech. But together, repeated in alternation, their literal (and opposite) meanings come to the fore.

However, once enacted by Ryan O'Neal, the words seem detached from intentionality. Their impact is cumulative, and it is extremely memorable, but certainly not in a way that O'Neal appreciated. Touted for its awful acting, the scene has become a favorite "so bad it's good" clip for the YouTube crowd. But rarely do viewers stop to ask whether *any* actor could have read those lines in accord with what passes for believability in Hollywood films. Many persons involved with *Tough Guys* urged Mailer to remove the scene, but he would not budge. His cinematic laboratory not only recorded his experiments, but also required their dissemination.

When I began this essay, I proposed the question, "How much film history does a film need?" Norman Mailer believed that *Wild 90*, *Beyond the Law*, and *Maidstone* represented a unique approach to filmmaking. They were distinct, and so for him they bore little relation to what had gone before. However, a conscious decision to break from the past is still engaged in a conversation with it.

In Mailer's case, that conversation was complicated. However original those three films were (and remain), there is no doubt that certain elements of them—including the basic idea of tackling fiction in the guise of documentary—had many important predecessors. And Mailer's films constituted a small part of their own history. *Wild 90* influenced *Beyond the Law*, and both of those influenced *Maidstone*.

With all of this I mind, I believe that another, related question is now in order: *How many film historians does a film need?* The past needs a present

to remember it: that much is clear. Many films have been forgotten because they were forgettable. But others have just slipped through the cracks. No one can watch every film. Some are lost, and even some of those that are found sit comfortably in archives without attention from viewers. They await rediscovery, their joys currently imprisoned in aging film cans. And they await interest from enough film historians (and theorists and critics) to be chronicled in studies of the cinema.

Regrettably, only a few of us have examined Norman Mailer's films in any depth. Herewith we announce an open call for membership in our small club. We seek allies and enemies alike. The ranks need to swell. After all, even in the space of just a few words, it is possible to suggest why Mailer's films deserve intervention by historians (and others) who have to date neglected them.

Wild 90 and *Beyond the Law* are mockumentary films, important if for no other reason than the fact that they helped initiate a genre that did not yet even have a name. They predate Mitchell Block's *No Lies* (1974), which has sometimes incorrectly been called the first mockumentary. They anticipate the large numbers of mockumentaries that have been produced from the eighties until the present day. And, rather than retrospectively copying the aesthetics of direct cinema, they were produced while its style was still being forged.

Long before most persons even knew what a mockumentary film is—and even some time before Orson Welles' important cinematic experiment *F for Fake* (1975)—Mailer tore down the genre's walls. With *Maidstone*, he marched into a more complicated terrain, one that proposed to re-examine the very nature of the cinema. Here Mailer chased the authentic, an elusive property that seems to be chimerically reconstituting itself in front of his cameras.

I submit that Mailer's first three films are important to film history and that their general absence from discussions of documentary film, mockumentary film, and the films of the sixties represents a gap that limits those of us interested in the cinema far more than it does Mailer. And while *Tough Guys Don't Dance* never rises to the level of importance of Mailer's earlier films, I believe that it can speak volumes about the rarely discussed issue of self-adaptation.

In *Wild 90*, Norman Mailer (as Prince) asks who invented the hammer. Norman Mailer did not invent the hammer. Nor did he invent the wheel.

But in the best tradition of films like *Citizen Kane* (1941), he borrowed various elements from prior films and reassembled those ideas anew. Rather than regurgitate via remake and rather than appropriate via homage, Mailer reinvented past practice. He reinvented a cinematic wheel, and more film historians need to keep it turning.

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