NORMAN MAILER AND THE CRITERION COLLECTION

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Maidstone and Other Films
By Norman Mailer
New York: The Criterion Collection, 2012
$31.96

MANY WORDS HAVE BEEN USED TO DESCRIBE the three films that Norman Mailer directed in the 1960s, but "accessible" has never been one of them.

Historically, Mailer's films have more often been talked about than actually viewed, as attested by the publication of his script to the rarely screened *Maidstone* (1970). To the extent that they have surfaced on home video, it has largely been in the form of poor quality bootlegs marred by weak visual definition and bad audio, the sad result of inferior transfers that have been copied and recopied *ad infinitum*. Given the legal limbo in which these versions existed, they were also hard to find, save for excised clips posted on YouTube, where one could easily view *Maidstone*'s climax that features Mailer, Rip Torn, and a hammer. Here was access, but of a type that unfairly removed a famous scene from a less famous film, thus placing emphasis on a segment best understood as part of the greater whole.

In January 2007, the French company Cinemalta released *Coffret Norman Mailer* (*Trois Films Underground de Norman Mailer*), a DVD set featuring all three of Mailer's early films: *Wild 90* (1967), *Beyond the Law* (1968), and *Maidstone*; the same company also released each of them individually. While these transfers easily bested the American VHS and DVD-R bootlegs (and also included an oncamera interview with Mailer), they were available only in Europe on Region 2. They also featured subtitles, a minor distraction for

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English-speaking audiences. That said, many of us applauded Cinemalta for their support of Mailer's cinema at a time when it was being ignored in America.

Fortunately, the Criterion Collection has rectified all of these issues by releasing the same three films in their Eclipse Series, which promotes itself as a "selection of lost, forgotten, or overlooked classics in simple, affordable editions." Here Mailer's directorial filmography (save for *Tough Guys Don't Dance* of 1987) appears in a streamlined, two-disc DVD set entitled *Maidstone and Other Films by Norman Mailer*.

The first disc pairs *Wild 90* and *Beyond the Law*. While Mailer himself admitted that *Wild 90* was amateurish, he was also correct in believing it possessed merit, both intrinsic and in terms of its influence on his future work. The film finds three "Maf Boys" (one portrayed by Mailer) holed up in a Brooklyn apartment to avoid being arrested or killed. Tedium begets tedium, with the audience feeling much of the same sense of boredom and entrapment as the film's characters for 81 minutes of running time that does not exactly run or even sprint. The quality of the acting and dialogue vary greatly, so much so that it is easy to understand the negative responses it has received in the past. However, *Wild 90* allowed Mailer to initiate his pursuit of a particular breed of onscreen "authenticity," one that he captured to some degree thanks to the film's use of handheld camera and existing lighting. Gritty and raw, *Wild 90* was an experiment, and deserves to be understood as such.

At approximately 98 minutes, *Beyond the Law* reveals a far more developed cinematic methodology. Increasingly comfortable with prevailing documentary aesthetics of the period, Mailer again relied upon handheld camera and natural lighting, but experimented further in his attempt to draw simultaneous attention to the film's fictional qualities, ranging from wipe transitions to a careful use of narrative flashbacks. The interplay between fact and fiction suits a storyline in which lawmen and lawbreakers swim in the same dirty water. Serving these goals is a far more consistent level of acting quality than seen in *Wild 90*, including from Mailer himself, who plays an Irish cop.

Disc Two of Criterion's set features *Maidstone*, Mailer's most fully realized and important film, in which he portrays a film director who considers a bid for the presidency. Had *Maidstone* been more widely viewed at the time, it might well have been quite influential, as it conflates elements of various

cinematic forms—documentary, avant-garde, and Hollywood storytelling—into a completely original and arresting journey, a fascinating chiaroscuro of fiction and nonfiction, one far more complicated and rewarding than, say, the "mockumentary" genre that it predates and to some extent anticipates. *Maidstone* deserves recognition alongside John Cassavetes' *Shadows* (1959), William Greaves' *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* (1968), Orson Welles *F for Fake* (1973), which to date I fear it has not received. Indeed, all three of Mailer's early films are an important dimension of a period in which many persons explored the porous boundaries between fiction and nonfiction, whether in the aforementioned films, in the nonfiction novels of Mailer, Truman Capote, and Tom Wolfe, or in the gonzo journalism of Hunter S. Thompson.

Thanks to this Criterion DVD set, reviewing Mailer's early films allows not only for an understanding of the evolution of his cinematic style, but also for an appreciation of the kinds of synergies that they share. "Maf Boy" Mailer grips a hammer with vigor in *Wild 90*, one that he uses to bang out his frustration, while Mailer later finds himself on the (apparently improvised and unexpected) receiving end of the same in *Maidstone*'s riveting climax.

Are the Criterion transfers the ultimate versions of Mailer's films? The answer is probably yes, as it is unlikely they will ever receive more careful attention in the future. The trio have never looked better on home video, and they have never sounded better either, a comment that might well extend even to their limited screenings in the sixties and seventies, as *Wild 90*'s original soundtrack was particularly hampered by poor audio. All that said, some viewers might be surprised by the sheer number of scratches and flaws on the prints, particularly on *Wild 90* and *Beyond the Law*, though their pronounced frequency would have been prohibitive for digital removal outside of an enormous expenditure of time and money.

More to the point, I believe in the scratches and the scuffs and all the flaws. For me, they have merit. As Andrew Sarris once remarked, we view films not in the past, but in the here-and-now. The only way for us to enjoy Mailer's films (or have mixed reactions to them, or dislike them, as the case may be) is in retrospect. It is in that vein that I believe the scratches operate meaningfully, as they add a veneer of authenticity, even if only a cinematic simulacrum thereof. Much like old, scratchy newsreels (or faked newsreels to which scratches were added, as in the case of *Citizen Kane* in 1941), these particular flaws have become part of Mailer's films. Unintentional, yes, but

the unintended represents a key aspect of how Mailer directed and edited his films, a process that he liked to call "commando raids on the nature of reality," in which the planned and the spontaneous coexisted.

Supporters of Mailer's work might bemoan the fact that Criterion released the three films in their Eclipse series, rather than in their main series (as they did for *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* and *F for Fake*), the result meaning that they include no audio commentaries or DVD extras of any kind (outside of film curator Michael Chaiken's brief and insightful printed notes). I do not count myself among such a group. Rather, I am thankful that—in an age when DVD and indeed all optical media seem to be on the verge of extinction—a company of Criterion's prestige has undertaken their release in any form, even if it is not the most ideal. After all, far too much time has been spent discussing these films for decades. The chance to see them is what really matters.