

THE TRITENESS OF TRAUMA AND
TIME: NON-LINEAR NARRATIVE IN
TOUGH GUYS DON'T DANCE

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Norman Mailer's 1987 film adaptation of his 1984 novel *Tough Guys Don't Dance* did not receive critical acclaim or even significant notice. In fact, the film was criticized as some critics saw the film as a misguided (and perverted) love letter to Provincetown and the film noir genre. As Roger Ebert asserts:

Norman Mailer's "Tough Guys Don't Dance" has the form of a thriller and an impressive content of sex and violence, but beneath that is a strange nostalgia that seems to have nothing to do with anything else. The nostalgia is for Provincetown, seen in a cold winter season with the weathered gray houses against a pink and purple sky, the gulls' cries lonely in the twilight. This place is so deeply seen that the people in the movie sometimes seem like ghosts, occupying it for a time (Para 1).

While Ebert, like others, goes on to eviscerate the film in his review, the keen focus and mention of nostalgia and the "strange" sense of time in the film exposes an interesting arena for revisitation of the film. However, in the thirty years since the film's release, little work has been focused on the film. There have been bubbles of conversation about the film, and most of these explorations focus on the elements of the novel that reflect on Mailer's narrative arc and legacy. Some film critics have begun to rediscover and to re-evaluate Mailer's film work—a body of work that is much larger than

expected, with four films under his guidance and other connected credits for acting, producing, and editing.

While his film canon is not as robust as his literary output, Mailer's contribution to the medium is one that should be evaluated and explored, as it exposes a valid contribution to an American film sub-canon or genre. American film, in the later parts of the twentieth century, celebrated a re-focus on temporal distortion and traumatic narrative disruption that referenced small but significant cinematic tradition of the non-linear narrative film genre. The tradition has its roots in the very beginnings of film with works such as D.W. Griffith's *Intolerance* (1916) and Abel Gance's *Napoléon* (1927) and continues as a very quiet yet important subtext through the 1970 with works by Robert Altman and Federico Fellini appearing (Dancyger 393–394). Mailer was keenly aware of the non-linear narrative structure in literature—many of his novels and works utilize shifting perspectives and lack of permanence to indicate the lack of control and understanding he sought to project in his literary works. So it is not a jump to see his desire to use a similar method and perspective in his film, *Tough Guys Don't Dance*.

However, in the 1990s the sub-genre exploded with films like *Pulp Fiction*, *Memento*, *Requiem for a Dream*, *Donnie Darko*, *Blue Velvet*, *The Usual Suspects*, and even very mainstream films, like those in *The Terminator Series*, all using a very disjointed—temporally—narrative arc. One of the key differences in the films being crafted in the 1990s is the role of the traumatic moment. The films during this time used moments of trauma as the time-breaking (or deconstructing) impetus, much like the literature of the prior period. Trauma has a long tradition of being implemented to indicate an event that cannot be understood in time or in narrative structure. Mailer was a master of deploying trauma in his narratives, as evidenced by his very graphic use of trauma in *An American Dream* (1965).

I am not going to be arguing that Mailer is the father of the cinematic tradition that made Quentin Tarantino or David Lynch possible and, furthermore, popular. However, I am going to assert that Mailer did engage in the addition of some meaningful tropes and methods for creating and producing the time-distorting, trauma-focused, porno-violence genre that so captured the attention of audiences in the later parts of the twentieth-century film community and provided the foundation for the twenty-first century's focus on the weird intersection between trauma and time in the sub-genre of film that follows the non-linear narrative tradition.

Mailer's film work focuses on baffling and troubling the medium. He wants to make the viewer question perspective and placement. In fact, Mark Edmundson asserts that, "it has been Mailer's aim to baffle expectations about who he is and what he might be capable of doing" (283). While Edmundson focused predominantly on Mailer's literary canon, his thoughts do provide a basis of understanding for why Mailer would decide to translate one of his more oddly-crafted and very non-linear works to the big screen in the 1980s. In similar fashion, Ebert observes in his review that "the film's center of gravity is in Madden's befuddled and paranoid head and much depends on a night he cannot remember, a night when he gained a tattoo and perhaps committed a murder" (Para. 5). Mailer, as Ebert and Edmundson appear to echo, focuses his film on the moment of trauma that cannot be understood or even placed. To try and attempt this in a film can be folly, as many who followed Mailer into the subgenre have come to understand.

I also believe that Mailer's contributions to this subgenre of film was affected by his own limitations—he was not a director, he was not a very good stage manager, and he had immense issues with budgeting and managing resources. Beyond these nuts and bolts limitations, he also was not a skilled visual artist—he did not work in film as well as he worked in words. The skill that he demonstrated in his prose and journalism just did not translate to the screen. And while we can challenge him endlessly for that, we, the community of scholars, should acknowledge that he did contribute some meaningful elements into the larger trajectory of film.

The film attempts to follow the novel—with a few deviations. Mailer uses the figure of writer Tim Madden as his focal point for the film. Using a very untrustworthy narrator and perspective like Madden contributes to the shifting time and knowledge in the film. Using this perspective is very much related to the non-linear narrative tradition. Madden is prone to blackouts. As viewers, we are not sure what he knows or does not know. His epistemological and ontological certainty is profoundly affected. The landscape of the film, the visual foothold is not one that can hold our understanding; instead it is the geography—the landscape of Provincetown—is the only anchor for his existence and understanding.

As the film unfolds, Madden awakens from a two-week bender to discover a bloodbath in his car. As the viewer, we are also confused by this staging and discovery. In fact, the image of the blood-covered Porsche can be

seen as attempting in a very heavy-handed manner to affect a traumatic reaction, or at least, a traumatic recognition, in the viewer. Yet it does not. It almost feels like trauma parody. It is as if Mailer wants us to both be horrified and humored by the slapstick-style presentation of the Porsche.

The film continues along in a jolted fashion, with time continually slipping, as Madden attempts to fashion some kind of understanding of the relationship between his lack of memory and the evidence in his car of violent bloodletting. This jolted experience is further heightened when Madden discovers a woman's severed head in his marijuana stash—sending him (and the viewer) on another set of questions and disjointed perspectives.

So, the standards of acting and reacting to these odd occurrences cannot be set. Mailer appears to take the same tack that he does in his novels and other fiction—there is a normalcy, a mundane quality to violence and the effects of violence. Yet, this stance does not translate to the screen as well as it does on the pages of Mailer's works like *An American Dream*. Instead, viewers are left with a sense of frustrated awareness. We know that we should care and even want to know whose head is in the stash bag and whose blood is all over the car and how Madden fits into these depictions. Yet we are simply left with a disjointed awareness that the violence and effects of violence are not part of our understanding, not part of our mundane everyday existence.

In fact, Christopher Busa asserts that Mailer uses a Richard Poirier technique called the "performing self" in the film to capture the sense of horror and humor. Busa asserts that the use of this technique, "(. . .) is an act involving pointedly self-aware exercise of self-expression intended as measured resistance to social oppression of any kind. It is a tactic for survival in horrible conditions that includes malicious deception as a routine tool" (249). The performance of self that Busa sees operating in the Mailer book connects to the manner in which the film was constructed. Mailer's work focuses on not only the deception of narrative but also plays on the deception of time as a result of the horrible experiences and events.

Further, a close friend of Norman Mailer, Eddie Bonetti, continued in his observations about the film at the premiere. Bonetti responded that the film operates as,

[A] central fantasy, the most volatile sexual situation in an adult's male's life, mainly because of the residue of impotence, an oedi-

pal impotence that every man inevitable felt when he was small and women were larger than him. It haunts the male character. I think it haunts Norman and he translates it into some ghost of his past (as qtd. in Busa 249).

Both Busa and Bonetti's observations demonstrate that they want the reader to understand that the film's focus is on the residue, the "ghostly" quality of the moment of trauma. To retell the trauma, one simply cannot go to the moment of trauma; instead, one must tell the story that surrounds it. And, unfortunately, to tell the story the line is never straight. It is always, by its very nature, non-linear.

Yet if we push into this disjointed awareness, we can see parts of the film that do deserve a second, critical look. These parts are the portions of the film that exemplify the way in which trauma provides an expected break in both temporal and structural narrative unity. While the true nature of trauma is the unexpected, the use of trauma in a narrative has become anything but unexpected. Like water as a symbol of fertility and femininity and erect buildings seen as emblems of masculine power, trauma's function as a temporal break has, too, become trite. And that is the commentary and what is happening in Mailer's adaption of *Tough Guys Don't Dance*. He provides another perspective on the triteness of trauma as the breaking part of the narrative in film.

The use of trauma as moment that provides for shifting temporality and narrative arc has been present for many years in film. If implemented correctly, it is beautiful, it is meaningful, and it is true. Think of the ending of *Hiroshima, Mon Amour*. The power of that film's ending captured something so different and so true. If it is presented incorrectly, it becomes a heavy-handed perversion of the power at best or, at worst, it becomes a farce.

In film, trauma has always had an important place. But, like changing film angles and perspectives and the addition of sound and soundtracks, the role of trauma has shifted too. The shift begins to happen concomitant with the shift in literature—and while it is easy to lump this shift into a post-modern or post-structuralist take on trauma, it is not. It should not be, but it is. Trauma should not be trite. It should not be deployed in a film for effect. And true trauma resists that deployment. Yet, how can one communicate the shift in a medium to using trauma as some sort of oddly shaped plot device that is meant to indicate time shifting and the lack of ontologi-

cal certainty in a way that is both critical *and* self-aware—by presenting it as both banal and terrible. And that is the way that Mailer enters the conversation in film.

I am sure that Mailer did not want *Tough Guys Don't Dance* to be critically unacclaimed or financially less than successful. I believe that Mailer was trying to make commentary—much like he did with his involvement in journalism—on how and why we use trauma to effect and affect an audience and why that affection should not simply be accepted but should be pushed against. Further, J. Michael Lennon in an interview with Phillip Sipiora observes of Mailer's filmmaking that Mailer "made some small contributions to avant-garde filmmaking . . . he is not going to go down in history as a great filmmaker, but he will be an important footnote in film history" (50). I agree with Lennon's observation, and I assert that Mailer's purposefully odd yet darkly humorous use of trauma in the film to create the non-linear narrative structure illustrates one of his contributions to filmmaking.

Jonathan Rosenbaum, of the *Chicago Reader*, perhaps said it best when he asserted that, "Norman Mailer's best film, adapted from his worst novel, shows a surprising amount of cinematic savvy and style." Rosenbaum observes that,

He translates his high rhetoric and macho preoccupations (existential tests of bravado, good orgasms, murderous women, metaphysical cops) into an odd, campy, raunchy comedy-thriller that remains consistently watchable and unpredictable—as goofy in a way as *Beyond the Valley of the Dolls*. Where Russ Meyer featured women with oversize breasts, Mailer features male characters with oversize egos, and thanks to the juicy writing, hallucinatory lines such as 'Your knife is in my dog' and 'I just deep-sixed two heads' bounce off his cartoonish actors like comic-strip bubbles; even his sexism is somewhat objectified in the process. (Par 1)

And it is the cartoonish perversion that Rosenbaum references that truly highlights how Mailer contributes to the shift in film in the later part of the twentieth century as he deploys trauma for more than just a temporal shift, and more than just a momentary break. Mailer, in a very novel way, forces

us to look at the triteness of relying on trauma to construct a non-linear narrative.

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