

LOST ISLANDS OF THE MIND

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The Cinema of Norman Mailer: Film Is Like Death

Edited by Justin Bozung

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READERS OF THIS JOURNAL will have at least a passing familiarity with the time that Rip Torn tried to kill Norman Mailer. No, that's not entirely accurate: it was Raoul Rey O'Houlihan who wielded the hammer in an attempt to murder presidential candidate Norman T. Kingsley in *Maidstone* (1970). "I don't want to kill Mailer, but I must kill Kingsley," Torn/O'Houlihan taunts as he pursues Mailer/Kingsley around the idyllic location in the Hamptons. Hammer discarded or dropped, Torn/O'Houlihan and Mailer/Kingsley tumble down the hill, the latter's teeth finding an unguarded ear; the former's hands getting a grip on a naked throat. Soon, a shouting Beverly Bentley and members of the crew join the fray, trying to separate the two. Mailer's children can be heard crying in the background, even above Bentley's screams. You can watch the whole scene on YouTube.

The most curious aspect of this scene is that the camera captures all of the chaos. Ostensibly, *Maidstone's* principle photography had wrapped the previous day, and there may or may not have been a meeting discussing the lack of a satisfying resolution to the major plot line of the film: the one in which Kingsley, an unlikely presidential candidate, carried on with an assortment of questionable characters under the threat of assassination. Torn/O'Houlihan may or may not have been given the role of assassin in order to resolve a film that must have felt to Mailer less of a film and more of a random collection of interesting bits. After all, Mailer, in a 1970 interview, sees himself

more of a “Navigator” or “General” who leads a “commando raid” that is “not measured by its aesthetic perfection . . . [but] by the amount of life it generates” and the reality it reflects or even creates. However, as Mailer would later see, the various scenes would not coalesce into narratives that a successful film needs rather than just a collection of home movies. Some parts just need to be planned to make a satisfying work of art.

Yet, as many of the essays and memoirs in *The Cinema of Norman Mailer: Film Is Like Death* argue, this ambiguous space between reality and artifice is exactly where Mailer intended to operate as filmmaker. This new collection, edited by Justin Bozung, contains nineteen original and reprinted essays, interviews, and memoirs that make the case for the importance of Mailer’s filmmaking attempts—including two essays by Mailer. Not all offerings see Mailer’s films in a positive light, but taken together, they do offer a poignant argument for not dismissing Mailer’s brief and experimental foray into film. As most of the contributions imply, his filmmaking reflects the concerns of his writing and continues his attempt to make, as he states in *Advertisements for Myself*, “a revolution in the consciousness of our time” by reimagining and reinventing genre, persona, and even reality itself.

In “Over Exposed: My First Taste of Film-making,” Michael Mailer remembers the aforementioned closing scene from *Maidstone* and its effect on him. He and his siblings Danielle, Elizabeth, Kate, and Stephen became part of the cast when they experienced what he calls the “trauma” of seeing his father attacked with a hammer. For Michael, this incident left an indelible mark on his psyche; one he chose to work through by embracing a career in film. This incident reflects the ambiguity that runs throughout the writing in *Cinema* and highlights Mailer’s attitude about and approach to filmmaking. In his introduction, Bozung likens Mailer’s approach to Shakespeare’s *Theatrum Mundi*. This is the notion that “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players” from *As You Like It* (2.7). Mailer was concerned with *acting* and its corollary *action*. In “Some Dirt in the Talk,” his essay on making *Wild 90* included in this volume, Mailer highlights the underlying contradiction, linking artifice to reality: your “author who had never acted at all in any way (except every day of his life—a quip to be examined further, close readers) did his best to hold up his end.” In other words: How do we know authentic action from the inauthentic—how do we become authentic *subjects* rather than inauthentic *objects*? What is the best way to act and what are the consequences of our actions for ourselves

and others? Acting/Action is at the heart of *Mailer's Cinema* and is wrapped up with morality, good/evil, self-definition, courage, and creativity.

Film is not the first thing I think of when considering the work of Norman Mailer, but *Cinema* contextualizes Mailer's filmmaking historically and thematically. Several of the essays see Mailer's approach to film on the same continuum as his concerns in writing. In "Mailer Interrogates Machismo," Maggie McKinley argues that in *Wild 90* he continues his interest in self-interrogation and social commentary by simultaneously *making* and *unmaking* masculinity in his portrayal of Prince. While Mailer and his cohorts Mickey Knox and Buzz Farber "play at being Mafiosos" (Mailer's words), Mailer's exaggerated performance calls attention to his public reputation as a "notorious character" and forces the audience to question what is real and what is performance. Similarly, Scott Duguid in "*Tough Guys Don't Dance* and the Cinema of Reaganism" likens *Tough Guys'* exaggerated dialogue and performances to cinematic camp as an "attempt to both expose or deflate masculinity as a masquerade by exaggeration or excessive homage." Bozung calls Mailer's first three films—*Wild 90* (1968), *Beyond the Law* (1968), and *Maidstone* (1970)—products of his "absurdist period" and prompts many critics to dismiss or to excoriate Mailer's films. It seems, too, that Duguid would include *Tough Guys Don't Dance* (1987) in this period as well.

The volume's subtitle is taken from Mailer's essay "A Short Course in Film-making." In it, Mailer ruminates about film's relation to theatre and whether it was possible to create what Mailer called a "filmed theatre." If theatre "rouses desires between the living audience and the living actors," film implies death: "film stirs suicide pacts where each individual in the audience goes over the horizon alone with the star; film speaks of the ambiguity of death—is it nothingness we go to, or eternal life?" Death here is the ultimate ambiguity for Mailer and the "dream life of the film existed . . . to prepare the psyche for apocalyptic moments which would likely never come." The star was like a Virgil navigating the audience's Dante through the after-life, showing "a secret place where the past tense of memory and the future intimations of the dream are interchangeable." True film inspires the mind to travel beyond the quotidian and allows it to more readily engage the world when the lights go back up. In contrast, commercial filmmaking does not speak of death, but of boredom, something Bozung, in "Visualizing Being and Nothingness: Mailer Meets *Godot*," suggests is a metaphor for life in both Mailer's early films and Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: "characters in both

Godot and *Wild* go each work to endure boredom or the pursuit of Being, as in acting, role-playing, and gameplay.” Mailer desired to make film existential like theatre—a filmed theatre that “emerged from the abominable limitations of the script” and “were subtly attached to a creative mist,” the existential moment, and ambiguity. Through death (*Godot*’s Nothingness), film speaks of action (Being), and this requires *acting*.

Implicit in acting is morality. For Mailer, moral choice always involves risk taking—potential violence, transgression, and psychosis—that could work to save or condemn one’s soul. Several essays in *Cinema* link Mailer’s earlier film work to his figuration of the White Negro or Hipster. For example, in “The Life and Death of the Celebrity Author in *Maidstone*,” Sarah Bishop contends that “Mailer represents the Negro-as-Method-actor as the ultimate master of performance, self-invention, and existential freedom.” Mailer’s model for his characters was his philosophical psychopath. Evil for Mailer was conformity, predictability, homogeneity: the non-action that leads to sickness born of too much psychoanalysis and commercialism. Existential choices were about acting at a moment of crisis, unaware of what the consequences will bring but with an intimate knowledge that one must grow or pay more for remaining the same. Not only does this theme echo throughout Mailer’s works since *The Deer Park* and *Advertisements*, it is also at the heart of his formal approach to film.Â

In “Some Dirt,” Mailer defines the existential moment, so crucial in his work: “you are in an existential situation when something important and/or unfamiliar is taking place, and you do not know how it is going to turn out.” This moment is crucial, definitive, and moral. He contrasts this with commercial filmmaking in a 1970 interview with Joseph Gelmis: “The moment you know what you’re going to do, you make a preparation. The moment you make a preparation, you’re a step removed from the moment in life. You see, I’m an existentialist, through and through and through.” The Hollywood commercial film is all about preparation and repetition, to safeguard from the existential situation; according to Mailer, it “does not give enough of a mirror to the complexity of our century.” Art is about a verboten creativity, and, states Mailer, the “aim of a robust art still remains: that it be hearty, that it be savage, that it serve to feed audiences with the marrow of its honest presence.” McKinley again: art reflects the (in)authentic life and the roles we perform in our daily lives in order that we may evaluate it. Bishop adds: “*Maidstone* holds up a mirror to the American media as well as the coun-

terculture, revealing its hidden tactics for creating an image of “~reality’ that suits its own ideological needs.” Real life is raw, unpredictable and often leads to moments of crisis. Mailer asks: How might these real-life crises be reflected in film? Through improvisation and the techniques of *cinéma vérité*, Mailer sought little “apocalyptic moments” and exaggerated them in his films in order to interrogate real life—something he felt was missing from commercial films—and help to create a similar reality.

Each of his first three films used a premise around which *acting* could occur—no traditional scripts, a mixture of friends and professional actors, and a crew (or several in *Maidstone*) to film what transpired. In this way, Mailer saw filmmaking like a military operation and the participants as commandos making a raid: the very act of filmmaking itself became the existential situation. In “A Course in Film-making,” Mailer concludes that “*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?” Indeed, as Bozung points out, *Maidstone* resembles the aesthetics of Reality TV in its mélange of storyline and behind-the-scenes. In “Commando Raids on the Nature of Reality,” Gary D. Rhodes puts it: “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.” This is Mailer’s (sometimes) controlled chaos that not only led to confusion on the set, but also a mixed-to-negative reception from critics and participants. Lee Roscoe, contributor, actress in *Beyond the Law* and *Maidstone*, and an intimate of Mailer’s, remembers her experiences with ambivalence:

Though [his films] are some of the worst ever made, that vitality, that wisp of exactly what the Sixties were about, perhaps still thrives in them. Some aura of an American going rotten, idealism thrusting up through the corruption and totalitarianism most of our set feared was inevitable.

Indeed, it is this sense of corruption that Mailer seems to be struggling against. It is a quotidian living in its midst that rots the human psyche. David Masciotra, in “Paradise Lost: Norman Mailer and the American Purgatory,” sees this dis-ease as purgatory in *Tough Guys*. Whereas his first three films

were grittier, seemingly more interested in the duality of humans in a Dostoyevskian sense (cf. Catriona McAvoy's "All of Us Are Policemen, All of Us Are Criminals: Discovering Dostoyevsky in a Re-Evaluation of *Beyond the Law*" that discusses criminality, good and evil, and punishment and redemption), *Tough Guys* was a Hollywood-financed commercial film that in many ways seems more abstract and dreamlike, concerned with the death of the body, the function of memory, and the dual nature of human psychology. Masciotra links this duality with the characters' struggles to escape the purgatory of contemporary America. His purgatory metaphor provides a strong thematic continuity with Mailer's earlier films. Only through courageous action can one escape limbo and live a more authentic life. This authentic life Masciotra links again to "The White Negro" and his pursuit of the apocalyptic orgasm that can provide the "key to freedom; where they are free to become good or evil—the better cop or the better criminal." It's the authentic action that, for Mailer, leads to an escape from purgatory and leads to either freedom or something darker: "The apocalyptic orgasm does not destroy any world, as much as it ends the existence of purgatory within the soul." *Tough Guys*, then, critiques this decade of excess with *Pulp Fiction*-like horror argues James Emmett Ryan's "Pulp Fiction in Provincetown," somewhere between campy trash and Lynchian art-house cinema (cf. Duguid) providing a cautionary tale of murderous excess (Regency) and reprieve though love (Madden), however temporary. Any reprieve in Mailer seems to be temporary as one must continue the struggle to grow, or else, . . . well, you know.

In the spring of 2013, I taught an undergraduate humanities survey called "Norman Mailer's America" in which I screened *Beyond the Law* and *Tough Guys Don't Dance* interspersed chronologically with a selection of Mailer's major novels and journalism. The class was thankfully enthusiastic, and they found Mailer's writing challenging and engaging—everything from *Advertisements*, to *Armies of the Night*, to *The Executioner's Song*. However, student reactions to his films were mixed; they found *Beyond the Law* technically alienating and a bit inaccessible, due perhaps to their commercial sensibilities and their high expectations from Mailer's written work. They laughed their way through *Tough Guys*, visibly rolling their eyes and shaking their heads at what they saw as a B-movie, unintentionally absurd. How could Mailer have missed the mark so badly? Once beyond initial reactions, we did have some fruitful conversations about the films, but stu-

dents seemed to leave the class agreeing that Mailer was *not* a capable filmmaker. Their conclusion might have been my fault, and, in all honesty, their reactions might have soured me a bit toward Mailer's films at the time.

I wish that I had a resource like *The Cinema of Norman Mailer: Film Is Like Death* at my disposal then. Because of this thorough, eclectic, and nuanced text, I now feel as if I could do a better job teaching Mailer as a filmmaker and communicate a more critical and contextualized understanding of Mailer's process and product. Now, after reading this comprehensive collection of memoirs, essays, and interviews—one that, I might add, will appeal to the enthusiast as well as undergraduate and graduate students—I feel as if I actually might be able to do Mailer justice as a filmmaker in the classroom. Now, instead of thinking about Mailer as a writer who pushed the boundaries of all the genres he worked in, thanks to Bozung's collection, I have a broader understanding of Norman Mailer and his cultural legacy.