

Research Paper

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Microphone and quill

Starting in the 1960s, New Journalism exponent Norman Mailer used literary techniques to make reportage his own

Abstract: The work of Norman Mailer (1923-2007) is far less prevalent in the German-speaking world now than it was in the 1960s and 1970s. Few of those who continue to read or discover his novels today know that the American author also worked as a journalist throughout almost his entire career. Yet the achievements of this prolific writer – who was always somewhat of a loose cannon in the literary establishment – in this area are not only of extraordinary value for contemporary history: In his texts in the field of New Journalism, the independent thinker showed time and again how reportages can be transformed into tangible spaces that readers enter and in which they can move around, explore freely, and encounter real people. Loved and hated in equal measure in his home country, the intellectual was a master of using literary techniques to enliven journalistic texts. This paper uses the famous report on the Democratic National Convention, »Superman Comes to the Supermarket,« to illustrate how Mailer redefined and went beyond the boundaries of traditional reportage. It also discusses why a militant opinion-former like Norman Mailer is no longer wanted in today's media landscape, even though this very fact would make him even more necessary.

Literature's greatest achievement is to create depictions of ourselves that we, the readers, are able to recognize as true people. Even the tragic poets of antiquity succeeded in creating the illusion of meeting a person put down in words. Although we encounter Antigone, Oedipus, Iphigenia and all the later theatrical figures as characters in plays, we are able to make out behind them the people as whom they were conceived and who they purport to be – because we recognize their behavior as typical of our species, however irrational and removed from the

reality of our lives it appears to be. Contemporary audiences were presented with characters who are faced with the rigors of fate; who love, suffer, fight, hate, and die – who undertake, experience, and endure everything that defines humanity. There was no lack of humanity in *mimos*, the coarse popular form of theatre in Greece, even three hundred years before Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.

Humanization in epic poetry

Dramatists have the luxury of allowing their characters to constantly talk about themselves and their fate, demonstrating it on the stage right in front of the audience's eyes and thus proving their vitality for all the senses. Writers of prose have a much harder time devising literary techniques that bring life to the characters in their imagination and make them appear as human beings. Slowly, over the centuries, they have developed ways of presenting their characters that make them ever more real. First, they scanned their characters from head to toe, describing their characteristics, actions, and problems. Then they made them speak: Through the characters' interactions with other protagonists, readers would ideally learn more about their being. In the final step, the author directly revealed the inner world of the people he had created, both through the form of perspective (omniscient narrator, first-person narrator) and through storytelling techniques (internal monolog, diary entries etc.).

This process of humanization in literature was almost as slow and arduous as the same process in fine art, where it took millennia to achieve a realistic depiction of us: from the immovable schematic representations of the Egyptians, to the Greeks' discovery of perspective, to the enraptured depiction of the saints and the expression of feeling in the art of the Middle Ages, to the ultimate anthropomorphism and individualization of masters like Dürer, Raphael, Titian, Correggio, and Caravaggio.

The necessity of lighting a magical spark like this remained limited to the artistic field for a long time, and did not initially spread to the modern press that began to develop at the end of the 18th Century. Journalists were convinced that they had no need for this kind of creative finesse. After all, their news, articles and columns were exclusively about real people. The writers did not have to provide any evidence that the people they were describing were intended to represent real people – they simply were.

The vital element in reportage

As reportages and travel reports became more common, however, newspaper publishers appear to have noticed that a livelier style of writing and a more flexible form were needed in order to retain readers' attention through longer and longer texts. »The particular attraction of the travel story,« writes Michael Haller in his definitive textbook on reportage, »lay in the free composition of the topic: The reporter decides when he wants to be where in order to record occurrences and impressions. He organizes his journey and enacts his topic, which is therefore never fully set in stone, but open to changes until the very last day« (Haller 2020: 32).

The people being reported on needed to be recognizable as such in the articles – simply knowing that they really existed was no longer enough. Vitality could not be achieved by merely quoting Mr. X or Mrs. Y in the article and recounting what he or she had done in that case. Journalists suddenly faced the same dilemma as the creators of epics and novellas centuries before, whose fundamental research in the development of techniques for humanizing and bringing to life their creations was ultimately adopted, refined, and added to by novelists.

Until the 1950s, the editorial offices of American newspapers and magazines were dominated by a consciousness that journalists, reporters, and their colleagues (of whom there were few at the time) had to adopt an exclusively objective stance at all costs and that they themselves and their personal views on the respective topic had to remain invisible. Indeed the impetus for the change of heart in such a fundamental question came not from the inside, from the editorial offices themselves, but from the literary figures who often provided texts to publications like the *New York Tribune*, *Collier's Weekly*, and *Harper's Magazine*. When they entered into partnership with the medium of newspapers, people like Mark Twain, Jack London, Ernest Hemingway, and Richard Wright brought with them literary skills that allowed them to represent people authentically and set the scene.

The knowledge potential of the American population rose dramatically following the end of the Second World War – a process described by John Hollowell, author of one of the best-informed monographies on New Journalism and its older sister, the nonfiction novel, as the »knowledge explosion« (Hollowell 1977: 24). This meant that the reading public were crying out for more in-depth representations in reporting: more background information, sharper interpretations and analyses, and psychological exploration of the people described (cf. Hollowell 1977: 24).

Paradigm shift through New Journalism

It was to take until the early 1960s and the appearance of New Journalism – compared by Tom Wolfe, one of the highest-profile representatives of this very heterogeneous trend, with the Huns’ invasion of Europe (cf. Wolfe/Johnson 1973: 3) – before the United States was to see a paradigm shift regarding what was considered admissible in journalistic reporting in questions of perspective, weighting, form, and, last but not least, entertainment. The representatives of this trend, including but not limited to writers, radically advanced the presentation of nonfiction records using literary styles. It is an exchange of expertise that continues in both directions to this day, with »literary authors regularly [adopting] research and presentation techniques that are usually attributed to the journalism system« (Eberwein 2013: 69).

The thirst for adventure among New Journalists was also driven by the emerging underground newspaper scene in the USA. Although the articles in papers like *Berkeley Barb*, *East Village Other*, *Los Angeles Free Press*, *Rolling Stone* (which quickly became a template for New Journalism under the leadership of Jann Wenner, popularizing the genre), and *The Black Panther* often lacked stylistic finesse, at least in the early days, their authors were brave and innovative. They cared little about journalistic standards, instead simply writing as they saw fit – an approach that occasionally produced astonishing insights and a fresh look at the rapidly changing reality of the 1960s, be it in society, politics, or cultural life. In this highly charged time, in which every tradition was called into question, the boldness of the newcomers spurred on their professional colleagues in New Journalism – described by American author Marc Weingarten in the title of his 2006 book on this variant so prevalent in the 1960s/70s as »the gang that wouldn’t write straight« – to try out new approaches themselves.

New Journalism articles experimented with a vast number of literary techniques over the next few years. Below are just some of the elements that were used again and again (cf. Hollowell 1977: 26ff.):

- *Dramatic Scene*: The unusually narrative dramatic structure of a nonfiction story is one of the main characteristics of New Journalism. Examples include *In Cold Blood* (1965), Truman Capote’s famous account of a quadruple murder in Kansas; Hunter S. Thompson’s reportage book *Hell’s Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs* (1967); and Joe Eszterhas’ article »Charlie Simpson’s Apocalypse« (1972).
- *Recording Dialog in Full*: The conversations noted down or recorded during an occurrence being reported on are repeated in full in the article in dialog form. Well-known examples of this include Gay Talese’s report »Joe Louis – The King as a Middle-Aged Man« (1962), produced in the form of a short story; Tom Wolfe’s Black Panthers report »Radical Chic« (1970); and

Norman Mailer's factual novel *The Executioner's Song* (1979) on double-murderer Gary Gilmore.

- *Status Details*: The author appraises the people in the text. The representation of their demeanor and conduct, their physiognomy, their clothing, their accessories, their speech and other features is intended to demonstrate to the audience their respective social status, just as Mailer did in his 1970 Apollo 11 reportage »Of a Fire on the Moon,« published in *Life* magazine, using meetings with the astronauts' wives, Wernher von Braun, other NASA staff, and even mere spectators at the rocket launch.
- *Point of View*: Instead of allowing the characters themselves to talk about their thoughts and points of view and creating a personality profile of them that way, the person is characterized by third parties close to them; the author has these people talk about the person in question. The most famous example of this approach is Gay Talese's reportage »Frank Sinatra has a Cold« (1966), in which the eponymous singer – the person that the extensive text is ultimately about – does not say a single word.
- *Interior Monologue*: In order to allow their readers a look inside the people described so prominently in their texts, authors often use the technique of interior monolog, giving them direct access to the way the person thinks and feels. Taboo in traditional journalism, the approach was ideal for Gay Talese in 1969 for »The Kingdom and the Power,« his report on the internal structures of the birthplace of his journalistic career, *The New York Times*.
- *Composite Characterization*: In this technique from literary practice, a character is compiled from the components and attributes of multiple real people, making him/her fictional. Everything about this character is true, everything he/she says has really been said, but not all by the same individual. This approach, which is tricky to achieve in journalism, was used by American author Gail Sheehy in 1971 with »Redpants and Sugarman,« the second part of her series of articles on prostitution in New York City, published in *New York* magazine.

These and other formal techniques presented later in this text were used in New Journalism to make reportages and reports appear like moving tableaux vivants that can be observed and even explored from all sides. In doing so, the journalists set out a new framework – borrowed from the spectrum of fictional works and rearranged for their needs – in order to present cleanly-researched facts in a clear way. On no account did they want to deceive their audience by letting their imaginations run wild in the description or when setting the scene. In »Frank Sinatra has a Cold,« for example, Gay Talese makes it absolutely clear that he has not spoken to the main character in his text. And the fact that many readers of Gail Sheehy's »Redpants and Sugarman« believed the person described in it to be

real was due to the negligence of the New York editorial office, who simply failed to print Sheehy's note to this effect. The same golden rule for journalistic articles applied then as it does today: Fictional sections must be marked as such.

Superman Comes to the Supermarket: JFK as an existentialist hero

One of the texts on which New Journalism – not original in his repertoire but consequently in its application – is based is »Superman Comes to the Supermarket« by Norman Mailer. Published in the American magazine *Esquire* in November 1960, the extensive text describes the Democratic National Convention held in Los Angeles in July 1960, at which it nominated John F. Kennedy as its candidate for the presidential election to be held later that year. Having made his debut twelve years earlier with the bestselling war novel »The Naked and the Dead,« the 37-year-old author was known to a limited extent as a political commentator, but not as a political reporter. He was thus somewhat hesitant to accept the commission for this report from *Esquire* deskman Clay Felker. Mailer had no experience of dealing with politicians and at first no idea where to start on such a text. Together with Felker, he flew to LA from New York a few days early to get a feeling for the city before the potentially momentous meeting of delegates began. Once Mailer had familiarized himself with this scene, which was so new to him, and gained some insight into how a nomination convention worked, the parameters for his report began to take shape. It ultimately took him just seventeen days to compose a text with thirteen thousand words or around eighty thousand characters (for comparison: The paper you are reading now has just under 7,000 words and just under 48,000 characters).

In terms of form, »Superman Comes to the Supermarket« is a hybrid of reportage and essay. At the start, Mailer withdraws to the position of a reporter. He allows his gaze to wander over Los Angeles, which he had previously described for himself back in 1949/50, when he tried to make it in Hollywood as a screenwriter, as »the ugliest city in the whole world« (quoted in Lennon 2013: 119). Now he describes it in the darkest of tones, not least due to the pastel shades of the buildings, which for him reflected the monotony of Mid-Western small towns and the lifelessness of suburbia and acted as a symbol of the conformity and superficiality of American society in the Eisenhower years. In other words, even as he describes external features, he is already incorporating his own opinion through associations and analogies. In the previous issue of *Journalism Research*, Hans Peter Bull wrote fittingly, »Those who want to report truthfully must try to suppress their own prejudice« (Bull 2021: 145). But Mailer, like other representatives of New Journalism, went the opposite way: »The new journalist's stance is often openly critical of the powerful interests that control the dissemination of

the news. By revealing his personal biases, the new journalist strives for a higher kind of ›objectivity.« [!] He attempts to explode the myth that any report can be objective by freely admitting his own prejudices« (Hollowell 1977: 22).

Novelist Norman Mailer attempts this higher form of objectivity in his role in often meandering sentences (the longest is 503 words long), initially by depicting everything and everyone in striking tristesse: Los Angeles? Aseptic purgatory! Hotel Biltmore, chosen by the Democrats as their headquarters? One of the ugliest hostelrys in the world! Pershing Square next door? A hovel for male prostitutes and their heterosexual-acting bourgeois customers! The delegates? Tasteless hillbillies! The nominated candidates? Outdated, weak, stale! The American dream? Smothered by the conservative, conformist, consumption-oriented zeitgeist!

But there is someone, a single individual, a radiant young man, John F. Kennedy, whose aura puts him over and above the jeremiad of Mailer's perception; just as, three months later in the first television debate, he would stand out on people's black-and-white television screens in his black suit, compared to his elderly Republican opponent Richard Nixon, who in his light-colored suit seemed to disappear into the matching color of the studio background.

In one paragraph of ›Superman Comes to the Supermarket‹ he writes: ›Since the First World War Americans have been leading a double life, and our history has moved on two rivers, one visible, the other underground; there has been the history of politics which is concrete, factual, practical and unbelievably dull if not for the consequences of the actions of some of these men; and there is a subterranean river of untapped, ferocious, lonely and romantic desires, that concentration of ecstasy and violence which is the dream life of the nation.« In his reportage, Norman Mailer wanted to represent this subterranean river – the bubbling forces of society's subconscious. It is an approach that befits a psychiatrist, perhaps a sociologist or even an artist, but not so much a reporter who works with things that can be experienced with the senses: The ››events‹ Mailer chose to describe in this essay were selected by a professional novelist, not a political journalist« (Merrill 1978: 101).

And something else in the way that Mailer compiled his reportage would be unimaginable for a journalist from the politics desk. The article states: ›One kept advancing the argument that this campaign would be a contest of personalities, and Kennedy kept returning the discussion to politics. After a while one recognized this was an inevitable caution for him. So there would be not too much point to reconstructing the dialogue since Kennedy is hardly inarticulate about his political attitudes and there will be a library vault of text devoted to it in the newspapers« (Mailer 1964: 46). The reporter Mailer refuses to report on the political statements made by the candidate. He simply does not see it as his role to repeat Kennedy's plans, convictions, and visions. After all, the reader can find

exhaustive reports on these in other newspapers. He is not omitting it because he does not have anything to say on Kennedy's political agenda, but because he considers other things that he can see from his high vantage point during the convention as more urgent. On the one hand, he wants to achieve a comprehensive reflection on what is happening in the country – and not just right now in Los Angeles; on the other, he wants to depict a real person (at the same time he dehumanizes him again by making him a cultural icon and proclaiming him an existentialist hero [cf. Watts 2016: 105], the model of the hipster that he outlined in such detail in his famous 1957 essay »The White Negro«), who in Mailer's view does not reveal himself here in the election campaign bling-bling poured out by the candidate. His message is: The yellow press hacks present can report on this if they wish, but he has no time for it. He is concentrating on the meticulous work of the anthropogenesis of John Fitzgerald Kennedy by numbers, whom he gives the breath of life before the very eyes of the readers using the techniques of a literary figure. This looks like this, for example:

»His personal quality had a subtle, not quite describable intensity, a suggestion of dry pent heat perhaps, his eyes large, the pupils grey, the whites prominent, almost shocking, his most forceful feature: he had the eyes of a mountaineer. His appearance changed with his mood, strikingly so, and this made him always more interesting than what he was saying. He would seem at one moment older than his age, forty-eight or fifty, a tall, slim, sunburned professor with a pleasant weathered face, not even particularly handsome; five minutes later, talking to a press conference on his lawn, three microphones before him, a television camera turning, his appearance would have gone through a metamorphosis, he would look again like a movie star, his coloring vivid, his manner rich, his gestures strong and quick, alive with that concentration of vitality a successful actor always seems to radiate« (Mailer 1964: 47).

Mailer's essay made great waves. He was lauded for his new approach to presenting a nomination convention like this, as well as for the way in which he brought the young John F. Kennedy to life: as a messianic figure who gives the American people, so desperate for a radiant hero, back their belief in their own American dream – and a figure who is capable of throwing off the encrustations of the paralyzing McCarthy era and the Eisenhower years. Mailer was in no way convinced by Kennedy's political agenda in summer 1960. As a former socialist, he saw it as too conventional. »[S]o I swallowed my doubts, my disquiets, and my certain distastes for Kennedy's dullness of mind and prefabricated politics, and did my best to write a piece which would help him to get elected« (Mailer 1964: 27).

The author himself believed that his article, which was published in *Esquire* a few weeks before the presidential election, tipped the scales in favor of Kennedy's shock triumph. He felt that he had indirectly won the election for the young Massachusetts senator. After all, »I had done something curious but indispensable for the campaign—succeeded in making it dramatic. I had not shifted one

hundred thousand votes directly, I had not. But a million people might have read my piece and some of them talked to other people« (Mailer 1964: 88 f.).

It is certainly true that political circles were now taking note of Mailer, and he also saw his article as his ticket onto the political dancefloor. Following Kennedy's narrow victory, he hoped for a position as an advisor in his team. Mailer saw himself as a disciple of Walter Lippmann, the influential political columnist, author, and magazine publisher who worked as an advisor to Presidents Wilson, Kennedy and Johnson. Norman Mailer, however, was to play no role in the new Kennedy administration. Thereafter, he urgently wanted to hold political office, specifically that of Mayor of New York. In November 1960, he planned to announce his candidacy for the election the following year.

No spot at the cabinet table

As an author, Norman Mailer had been suffering a creative crisis for some years. Following his success with *The Naked and the Dead*, his novel *Barbary Shore*, which discussed left-wing theory, had been a complete flop. Both it and its follow-up, *The Deer Park*, were also panned by critics. Since the mid-1950s, he had been shifting his focus more and more towards writing for newspapers and magazines. In 1955, he was one of the founders of the New York scene newspaper *The Village Voice*, in which he initially penned a column. However, he withdrew from editorial collaboration a few months later following disputes over the editing and direction of the magazine.

Mailer proved unable to work in a team during this phase of his life. He was riddled with self-doubt and suffered from depression. At the same time, with second wife Adele Morales at his side, he had an extravagant social life in the city. Mailer never turned down an invitation to a party, and was often the last to leave: drunk and high. He smoked cannabis and regularly took uppers and downers during these years. His emotional state and substance abuse often led to extreme mood swings, the most dramatic of which, at a party on November 19, 1960 at which he planned to announce his candidacy for the mayoral election, led him to stab his wife with a knife, leaving her with life-threatening injuries – just over a week after John F. Kennedy's election as the 35th President of the United States. Even if Kennedy had wanted Mailer as part of his team, these events would certainly have put a stop to that. Kennedy ultimately asked the already frail Robert Frost to be the first poet to perform one of his poems at his inauguration. Mailer, who was notoriously desperate for admiration and would have not hesitated for a second to take up such an invitation from a President Elect that he himself had enthroned, would probably have hardly noticed this as a further slight.

Yet Norman Mailer was far from finished as an author. His wife was amazed that, even in his most extravagant phases, he was still able to work, »still capable of writing, sometimes writing well, as the article on Kennedy in *Esquire* proves« (Mailer 2000: 347). What made Mailer's article truly special was the fact that it was not actually a text about Kennedy. Given the effect that the author believed his text to have had on the election result, the reader is astonished to see how seldom Kennedy actually appears in the text. What counts is the moments in which Mailer has him appear. The scenic structure of the text is put together in such a way – showing the form intentions of a literary man – that Kennedy appears as a *deus ex machina*. As he arrives at the Hotel Biltmore, the reader first witnesses the young political climber from a distance. Yet already, his demeanor and appearance are such that the reader forgets everything they had heard from Mailer about what he found repellent about America in 1960. It is only later that we get a little closer to Kennedy in a report on a press conference, before he ultimately faces us in a brief interview he gives to Mailer.

But, as stated before, these appearances are short. The author wants to give us an overall picture of the convention; he is desperate to be in as many places as possible, soaking up all the sights and conversations and presenting them to the reader so vividly that the reader feels as though they are taking part in the convention themselves. The deskman responsible, Clay Felker, said that his author delivered »insights that you yourself could never have thought of« (Manso 1985: 305). And yet, even in his absence, the immanence of the future President is tangible in everything that Mailer reports and reflects on in the article. It is an astonishing journalistic achievement that was keenly discussed at the time by influential up-and-coming journalists like Ed Kosner, Don Forst, Pete Hamill, and Al Aronowitz. Incidentally, if *Esquire* publisher Arnold Gingrich had had his way, the article would never have been published. Felker reports: »Gingrich hated the piece, thought it was just blather. Except for the fact we had left space in the issue, he wouldn't have run it, and he told me so« (Manso 1985: 304).

Mailer in the third person

In »Superman Comes to the Supermarket,« Mailer made use of the aforementioned stylistic devices »dramatic scene,« »status details,« and »recording dialog in full« and, in the reflections he made in the article, left no room for doubt that he planned to write for a hand-picked, educated readership under the guise of a *poeta doctus*, as a reporter just as he had as a columnist and essayist. Yet the most typical ingredient of his journalist work was not yet in evidence. It was not until four years later, in the *Esquire* article »In The Red Light: A History of the Republican Convention in 1964« about the Republican Party convention that was

dominated by the nomination of the arch-conservative Senator Barry Goldwater as the party's presidential candidate, that Norman Mailer first found the writerly spin for which he would later be lauded, derided, and scorned in equal measure. Having stated even in his »Superman« article that he was not willing to limit himself to the role of uninvolved observer, he now went a crucial step further and incorporated himself into his reportage as someone involved in the events that he was describing as a reporter. He does not go quite as far as a fireman who lights fires only in order to put them out (a line that he would eventually cross four years later), but Mailer is certainly no less than a combusive agent for his story; a catalyst for events that he himself wants to advance and on which he has been commissioned to report. His biographer Carl Rollyson notes, »Mailer is not outside the action but an integral part of the setting he describes« (Rollyson 1991, 133). Mailer was to expand and carry to the extreme this dual function of reporter and actor in his 1968 Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *The Armies of the Night* and his reportage book *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*.

In the view of Werner D'Inka, this is a dangerous route to go down, and one that a journalist and reporter ultimately cannot afford to take. After all, the »author is the servant of his material and the trustee of his audience, but not a self-publicist« (D'Inka 2019: 219). Yet Norman Mailer, whose personal style is in the tradition of people like William »Peter Porcupine« Cobbett, H. L. Mencken, and the muckraker, believes that he bears responsibility in all three roles. He feels a duty to the material and the audience as an author, just as he feels a duty to the events into which he, the go-getter, has been thrown. In his reportage *Miami and the Siege of Chicago*, for example, he describes how he defies the orders of a National Guardsman in the civil war-like atmosphere of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago in 1968 and as a result is arrested by a group of soldiers and briefly held in custody; how he sees a certain beauty in the tumultuous scenes under his 19th floor hotel room window, where groups of demonstrators are being dispersed by police using tear gas and batons. He even openly comes out on the side of the left-wing demonstrators, whose forbearance and stamina in the face of massive intervention by the police and National Guard over many days deeply moves Mailer, by speaking to them and assuring them of his solidarity. Later, he even makes a half-hearted attempt to convince three hundred party delegates to join a protest march in order to form a human shield around the young demonstrators.

Journalistic no-go or might-go

Just as actors are taught very early not to look directly into the camera while filming, journalists in countries in which the media is not spoon-fed by politicians

learn during their training that neutrality must always be the top priority in their reporting. Yet there are limitations to this rule. After all, »[w]hile ›neutrality‹ is one standard in journalism, it's always been clear that journalists need not be neutral about everything. They need not be neutral, for example, about violent attacks upon the institutions that make democracy and self-government possible, a system in which they play a crucial role« (Clark 2021). If we included the sovereign as an entity in the institutions, we would also be able to apply this exception to Mailer's descriptions of the unrest in Chicago and his role in the protest march on the Pentagon in 1967 (»The Armies of the Night«). But the freedom-loving Mailer saw self-committing categories like these as obsolete in this journalistic work anyway.

Having used it once in the aforementioned article »In The Red Light,« Mailer also ruled out the first person form categorically rejected for reportages by Werner D'Inka. From then on, Mailer referred to himself in the third person. Positioning himself in his articles as one character among the others, in long reports he gave himself names like »the reporter« (*Miami and the Siege of Chicago*), »Mailer« (*The Armies of the Night*), »Aquarius« (*Of a Fire on the Moon*), and »the interviewer« (*The Fight*), guiding this character through his reports and reflections like a novelist navigates his characters through a story. It is therefore important that researchers are careful when positing a congruence between the author and the characters modelled on him in Mailer's journalistic work.

As well as further reportages on nomination conventions (right into the 1990s), Mailer's career in journalism saw him try his hand at everything from columns, reviews, and interviews (including one with Madonna) to his investigative work on Lee Harvey Oswald, for which he was granted access to previously closed KGB files. Sixteen years earlier, he had produced *The Executioner's Song* (1979), a text that straddled the boundary between a journalistic report and a nonfiction novel. His book on Gary Gilmore, a murderer who insisted on the implementation of his own death sentence, is a brilliant achievement of research and authenticity. Together with author and director Lawrence Schiller, with whom he had worked on a controversial yet commercially successful Marilyn Monroe biography in 1973, Mailer conducted hundreds of interviews and used them as the basis for a text that took the reader to the scenes of the crimes, into prison, to the court room, and into the execution chamber. It is also lesson in the substantiality of the Mormon state of Utah, an individual's autonomy regarding his own death, the meaningfulness of the death penalty, and the official processes involved in a potential pardon.

Norman Mailer's journalistic writing is just as abundant and rich in insight as his novels – if not more so. The Americans say »that journalists write the ›first draft of history [...]« (Vaughn 2008: xxv). By observing and simultaneously commenting on the events of the second half of the Twentieth Century in the United

States, Mailer made a significant contribution in this regard – one that will help younger generations to see and understand where the lines of confrontation within American society lay and how the stories that emerged from them came together to form history. Mailer recorded historic events and, by writing them down, created a literary and journalistic reenactment that must be seen as complementing conventional printed history books.

Unconditional strength of opinion

Throughout his career as an author and public figure, Mailer had a reputation for representing opinions that were very rarely common sense, publicizing them at all events, and defending them against all resistance. After the Second World War, for example, he campaigned for the election of the progressive presidential candidate Henry Wallace, who advocated a settlement with the Soviet Union and wanted to end the Cold War – a position that was considered too controversial even by many on the left wing in America in the late 1940s. Mailer went even further, calling for a socialist regime on American soil. It was an unpopular position that could even have cost him his career at a time when Senator Joseph R. McCarthy of Wisconsin »set forth to put the fear of God into the Americans about communism« (Angermann 1995: 346). At the same time, Mailer stood up before an audience of communists and Stalinists at a peace conference funded by socialist powers and explained to them that the two systems – the USA and the USSR – would ultimately converge and navigate towards a kind of state capitalism. He initially revealed himself to his comrades and allies as an anti-Stalinist – and as someone who would not be brought into line if he came to different conclusions himself. Yet these conclusions were not always correct. In an essay entitled »The Meaning of Western Defense,« published in *Dissent* in 1954, for example, he explained the necessity of the Americans defending Europe. However, his observations, which he himself admitted lacked the analytical elegance of a writer like Walter Lippmann (cf. Mailer 1992: 187), proved misguided. The same goes for his thoughts on the super-volcanic activity that he believed existed on the moon, as described in *A Fire of the Moon*, his generally brilliant examination of the first moon landing, which was also one of the high points of his flirtation with New Journalism.

Even as Mailer was spared jail time for his attack on his wife, he remained opinionated and provocative, conducting public feuds with figures such as conservative commentator William F. Buckley Jr. and fellow writer Gore Vidal. Married six times and known for his promiscuity, pronounced machoism, and fascination with violence, he also attracted the combined fury of prominent feminists like Kate Millett and Germaine Greer in the early 1970s with his polemic »The Prisoner of Sex.«

In his essay »The White Negro,« he had shown no consideration for the sensitivities of Black Americans like his friend and fellow writer James Baldwin, using numerous racial stereotypes. Although he did enjoy using targeted provocation as a way to initiate conversation, the role of public bogeyman was not a calculated business move on Mailer's part. Calling himself a psychic outlaw, he instead wanted to provide food for thought and – even at the risk of being ostracized – to initiate social and political debates. He did this by touching on taboos, picking up on sensitive topics and further escalating the contentious discussions held on them, in order to achieve and ensure life and thought that were both true and free. It was this attitude that shaped his journalistic work.

An inopportune moment for Mailer's type of full-contact journalism

This was in an age before unfettered political correctness and cancel culture. These two battle cries are examples of a development in the shaping of public opinion that would today make it impossible for someone like Norman Mailer to pursue the kind of full-contact journalism he conducted under his terms. Mailer's companion and friend over many years, Gay Talese, regretted this gradual process that is changing the entire social discourse of his country, as he described in an interview:

»Now I miss Norman very much, for present-day reasons. There is no Norman Mailer to defend free expression in the United States. My nation is currently overwhelmed with hypocrisy in the name of virtue. We defend human rights, and preach it to the world, but do not practice it ourselves. Editors of newspapers and magazines are fired today if they print things that their young staff doesn't agree with. *The New York Times* opinion editor [James Bennet, S.T.] lost his job for that reason last week. There are other editors that this happened to this week, also – one at the *Philadelphia Inquirer* [Stan Wischnowski, S.T.]. Not long ago, the editor of *The New York Review of Books* (Ian Buruma) was canned because he published the work of a controversial writer. Why am I mentioning all this to you? Because right now there are no writers, no editors, no publishers, nobody at all... who is protesting this! We in America supposedly espouse freedom of speech, and freedom to write and think and talk; but when there is something that the majority finds offensive, we experience censorship and job loss« (Thomsen 2020a).

While the various voices in the academic discourse of the German-speaking world are still concerned with determining what the term ›cancel culture‹ even means and trying to agree on whether and in what form the phenomenon even exists here, here, too, it is becoming increasingly difficult to represent an opinion that is not in line with the consensus. Those at the wheel when it comes to assessing what is politically correct, what can and cannot be said in public, are

issuing more and more recommendations on who might and might not have suffered during general discourse.

Even in the Eisenhower era, someone like Norman Mailer would have had an easier time as a bestselling author finding public platforms from which to broadcast his views on fields as diverse as literature, race, homosexuality, religion, violence, drugs, or politics, which he always represented so trenchantly and presented so apodictically. Admittedly, those making US magazines like *Esquire*, *Dissent*, *Life*, *The New Yorker*, and *The Atlantic* at the time had plenty of progressive spirit, providing a stark contrast to the stuffy climate in society as a whole. Mailer attacked. He provoked strong counter-reactions with both his personality and the vehemence of his attacks. Yet he remained in dialog with most of his opponents. For example, as the author of the novel *An American Dream*, perceived by so many feminists as misogynistic, he faced his adversaries in a public debate.

This dispute took place fifty years ago. What about today? Professor and author Wendy Lesser believes that the current conditions shaping public discourse would go against someone like Norman Mailer – »this era of trigger warnings and extreme sensitivity about issues of race and gender is not really an era for appreciating Mailer to the fullest« (Thomsen 2020b).

However, a polarizing figure like him – someone who tolerated or even encouraged objections – would be so important in today's climate, in which anyone can publicize their views in the infinite space of the internet yet no-one seems open to any other opinion, even complementary ones. The rules on what one is permitted to say to whom in which public space currently appear to be being dictated by the populace, which is mollycoddling itself with its own hard ethical and moral line. An unconditional defender of freedom of expression, speech, and the press, John Stuart Mill stated in the 19th Century: »If all mankind minus one were of one opinion, and only one person were of the contrary opinion, mankind would be no more justified in silencing that one person than he, if he had the power, would be justified in silencing mankind« (Mill 2009: 19). In an interview three years before his death, Norman Mailer confirmed once again the constant need to defend this principle: »I hate political correctness. My gut feeling is that at any given moment you have to explore what the nitty-gritty is, what the sense of the occasion is. I'm opposed to ideology« (Hammond 2004).

About the author

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