

Masteroppgave i Engelsk  
Hunter S. Thompson and Gonzo Journalism

Av  
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Masteroppgaven er gjennomført som et ledd i utdanningen ved Universitetet i Agder og er godkjent som sådan. Denne godkjenningen innebærer ikke at universitetet inntår for de metoder som er anvendt og de konklusjoner som er trukket.

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The process of writing a master thesis takes its toll on both student as well as surroundings, and there has been made sacrifices on both sides. Family and social life has been replaced with a considerable amount of hours in front of books and computers, but what an interesting ride it's been....after all.

*So we shall let the reader answer the question for himself.*

*Who is the happier man, he who has braved the storm of life and lived,  
or he who has stayed securely on shore and merely existed?<sup>1</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Carroll: 1993: 279

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## Introduction

The emergence of Gonzo Journalism in the beginning of the 1970s was not just about the success of a literary oddity, but it was also the success of the personal endeavour of one single man. Being already a well-established reporter, the success and realisation of Hunter Stockton Thompson's leap from ordinary literary journalism via New Journalism into Gonzo Journalism came as a surprise not only to Thompson himself, but also to the established literary elite. The style of Gonzo Journalism was not a result of deliberate experimentation, but it would nonetheless forever change Thompson's technique of approaching stories.

Thompson was a freelance journalist, and he had to fight his way to success. Being born in Louisville, Kentucky in the 1930s, the road to becoming a successful writer was not a given matter. Coming from a middleclass home, the early passing of his father and his mother's consequent problem with alcohol had its effect on the young and boisterous Hunter. He did in fact develop a drinking problem at the age of 14, which sadly was not uncommon in the South in those days. However, the interest for reading and writing also came naturally to him, and among his favourite authors were William Faulkner, Scott F. Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemmingway. Inspired by these authors combined with a troublesome adolescence, Thompson saw writing as his way out of Louisville. At the age of 16 Thompson was given the option of spending time behind bars, or joining the air force after an unjust trial, which he had had nothing to do with. Thompson chose the Air Force, and would initiate his writing career as Sports Editor on the Eglin Command Courier, where he was stationed. He never looked back at Louisville, until about decade later when he returned with a vengeance for the legendary article "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved". The article dealt with his own people, and it marked the beginning of Gonzo Journalism with all the typical trademarks of this new literary hybrid: controversy,

personal involvement and dripping sarcasm. His southern background provided him with great inspiration for his future career as a writer, for good or ill, and he established himself as a reliable social critic with great interest and care for the forces acting up in the contemporary American society. Throughout the 1960s Thompson would sometimes strive just to get food on the table, and there was perhaps a great deal of envy towards all the people experiencing wealth and prosperity in this period of time. Many of these people were harvesting the fruits of hard work and a belief in the American Dream, which would not just a myth to Thompson, but a genuine opportunity. He was appalled at how easily people took these opportunities for granted. As he spent long periods of time in South America during the early 1960s he would develop a strong sense of alienation towards his own country women and men. One of his earliest major written projects was the novel *The Rum Diary*, and already here this sentiment towards his own people shines through. “The patio was crowded, so we sat inside at the snack bar. All around us were people I had spent ten years avoiding – shapeless women in wool bathing suits, dull-eyed men with hairless legs and self-conscious laughs, all Americans, all fearsomely alike” (Thompson: 1998a: 100). Thompson always dealt with contemporary issues in his projects, and he was greatly influenced by the radical and ideological thinkers of the time. The peace & love generation was the catalyst of society, and the United States had come to a point where old values and ideals were faced with a new reality. He quite clearly identified and sympathized with the peace & love generation that wanted to preserve these ideals along with a newfound respect and compassion for mankind. The romanticized image of the American Dream was also a part of these old ideals, and it would in turn dominate the majority of his bibliography. What it all boiled down to was a desire to reaffirm and secure the status of the American Dream, which had gradually lost its value, and now stood upon the brink of permanent damage. However, in one of his many letters, he announced that a turning point had been reached with the assassination of John F. Kennedy. “I

am trying to compose a reaction to the heinous, stinking, shit-filled thing that occurred today” (Thompson: 1998b: 417). To Thompson the state of the American Dream was so corrupted that soon the idea of the imminent death of the American Dream came to be a common theme in his productions. At the top of these destructive forces was, in his opinion, president Richard Milhous Nixon, who became Thompson’s favourite satirical object. The bottom line was that a generational shift were about to happen, and the two sides had very different beliefs in what strategy to follow, which is a common theme for all three works discussed in this thesis.

There is a number of different fan pages on the internet devoted to the life and books about Thompson, and there are at least five biographies written on his flamboyant life style. However, the selection of scholarly writing pertaining to his written achievements is scarce. The objective of this thesis then will be to make an analysis of Hunter Thompson’s journalistic method, and provide with a characterisation of what constitutes Gonzo Journalism. For this purpose I will be using the article “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” (1970), which is considered to be the first ever Gonzo production, as a template. The non-fiction book *Hell’s Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs* (1967) will be presented as the nascent attempt of Gonzo Journalism, whereas *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971) will be analyzed as a failed Gonzo experiment. For background information on Thompson I will rely on the biographies *When the going gets weird – the twisted time and life of Hunter S. Thompson* by Peter O. Whitmer, and E. Jean Carroll’s *Hunter – The Strange and Savage life of Hunter S. Thompson*. For discussions on journalism I will be relying on *The New Journalism* by Tom Wolfe and *A History of American Literary Journalism* by John C. Hartsock. Another important document when discussing Gonzo Journalism will be the articles “Fear and Loathing on the Buffalo Trail” by Juan Bruce-Novoa, and “Jacket copy for Fear and Loathing in Las

Vegas” by Hunter Thompson, which can be found in *The Great Shark Hunt* (1979).

Chapter one will serve as an introduction for the hierarchy of writing that exists between literary artists and journalists, and the divide between tabloid and freelance journalists. There will also be a thorough discussion on a general outline of New and Gonzo Journalism as well as differences and similarities between the two genres. This will lead into the first discussion in chapter two, where the Thompson’s journalistic methods and techniques in *Hell’s Angels* (1967) will be addressed both in terms Gonzo and New Journalistic techniques. Chapter three will deal with establishing a template for Thompson’s method as a Gonzo journalist, and the outline of Gonzo elements in “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” (1970). In chapter four the presence and lack of Gonzo elements will be dealt with in the discussion of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971).



## Literary Journalism, New Journalism and Gonzo Journalism

Ever since mankind has been able to communicate there has been a need for people and means of communication to spread information and report about events. As the amount of writers and written information has increased a split in form and status has developed between fiction and journalism. A crude definition of fiction is that it tells a story that does not have root in real-life or real-life events, and in general it can be said to be a product of a writer or poet's fantasies, thoughts and ideas. Journalism on the other hand is supposed to be based on real events that have in fact taken place, and that can be traced in history. Within the two categories there are several subgenres, and common for New Journalism and Gonzo Journalism is that they both belong to a cross-breed of fiction and journalism called "literary journalism". "Such a literary journalism, then, is a kind of literary "faction", on the one hand acknowledging its relationship to fiction – as we conventionally understand the meaning of fiction – while on the other making a claim to reflecting a world of "fact"" (Hartsock: 2000: 1). In other words it addresses real-life events by borrowing literary devices from the world of fiction. Historically this way of conducting journalism can be traced back to the days of Plato and Socrates, but the modern day American literary journalism, which is being dealt with in this thesis, has its roots in the decades prior to the American Civil War.

In terms of status there has always been more prestige in being a fictional writer such as a novelist, poet or playwright than there has been to be a journalist. "Complex factors (historical, cultural, ideological, political) lie behind journalism's low literary and academic status – and the marginalization of the journalistic imagination" (Keeble & Wheeler: 2007: 3). "[...] the 'news' media [...] have been associated with scandal, gossip and 'low' culture" (Keeble & Wheeler: 2007: 3). Journalism has ever since the beginning of daily newspapers been associated with

muckraking, spread of gossip and other questionable information, which undoubtedly practitioners of fiction have helped to support. In *The New Journalism* Tom Wolfe discusses this phenomenon, and he outlines a system of artistic hierarchy for writers. At the top are novelists and poets followed by the so-called men of letters, which include literary essayists, biographers or scientists. Their province was that of analysis, insight and a general display of knowledge, but they were the reigning practitioners of non-fiction. The use of literary techniques has been the province of fictional writers who have had the ultimate freedom to blend and experiment with their material into “beautiful” prose, whereas there are several restrictions when it comes to language style and vocabulary in classic journalism. The lower class, then, consisted of journalists who were either classified as day labourers, rather crudely called 'scoop writers' and 'feature writers'. The scoop writers would typically have to dig up raw information for stories for newspapers or other media, and there was an internal competition at the office as to who could produce the most scandalous story published before the others. The feature writers worked freelance and were slightly less looked down upon. There was no competition among feature writers, but rather an ambition of some day break free from everything and write a world-changing bestseller novel (Wolfe: 1973: 5). At the very bottom of the chain were a group of feature writers working for *The New Yorker*, who were not even considered part of the game. However, it was among this group of journalists, who had no literary credentials to speak of, that the major change in journalism in the 1970s would take place. They would use all the same literary techniques as the novelists, they helped themselves to the insights of researchers and men of letters and at the same time went about their usual work of digging up information. “...they’re taking on *all* of these roles at the same time – in other words, they’re ignoring literary class lines that have been almost a century in the making” (Wolfe: 1973: 25). The major breakthrough of the New Journalists in the 1960s was not the fact that they employed literary techniques in their

articles and stories, but rather that they managed to get some academic recognition for their work and literary genre (Wolfe: 1973: 25).

In the 1940s, 50s and 60s the status of the novel and the idea of writing a novel stood especially strong on the American literary scene. However, in the early 1960s a subculture of freelance journalists would start a trend that would turn things around. People like Gay Talese, Norman Mailer, Truman Capote, Joan Didion and Jimmy Breslin among others started writing articles for magazines like *Esquire* and *Life* that could easily have been turned into a short story (Wolfe: 1973: 11). A big breakthrough for New Journalism was the publishing of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* in 1965, which: "... assumed iconic status not only in the world of literature" (Keeble & Wheeler: 2007: 130). It was also: "...the harbinger of the New Journalism of the 1960s and '70s" (Keeble & Wheeler: 2007: 130). Another important milestone was Tom Wolfe's 1964 article called "There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!) That Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby", which was published in *Esquire Magazine*. The article broke with the conventions of standard journalism in that it used scenes and dialogues to convey the story about the hot rod and custom made car culture. As the title indicates there is also extensive use of onomatopoeia and experimental use of punctuations and exclamation points. In retrospect the article is considered Wolfe's breakthrough as a New Journalist, and it came about when he was suffering from a writer's block. In the end he simply wrote down all his notes in a memorandum, and sent them to his editor at *Esquire* (Wolfe: 1981: 11). The editor, Byron Dobell, simply published the notes unedited, which was a result of stream-of-consciousness and contained unconventional use of both punctuation as well as literary techniques. The reactions to the article were filled with both appraisal and uproar, and it marked a change in the history of journalism.

According to Seymour Krim, who was editor of the *Nugget*, the coining of the term 'New

Journalism' happened some time in 1965 (Wolfe: 1973: 23). The term is usually associated with Tom Wolfe, but journalists like Talese, Breslin and Capote also had great influence in shaping the contemporary journalistic scene. Even though there was nothing "new" about the genre per se, that was the term that caught on and the genre would dominate journalism into the 1970s. Throughout the 1960s New Journalists gradually adopted the techniques of realism, and the devices that had given the realist novel its unique power. When trying to make some kind of characterisation of New Journalism, there are four devices stand out that were borrowed from fiction. The first one is to construct the story by moving from scene to scene and resort as little as possible to sheer historical narrative. This explains some of the extraordinary feats of reporting the journalists undertook, so that they could actually witness live scenes in other people's lives. The second device was recording the dialogues in full. The purpose of this was to involve the reader more closely in the story, which would establish and define characters more quickly and effectively than any other device. Another variant of this is what Wolfe has referred to as the *downstage voice*, which involves seeing characters through the eyes of someone who was actually in the scene, and thus adopting their vernacular, rather than being "a beige narrator" (Wolfe: 1973: 18). This change in perspective could often occur in the middle of a paragraph or even sentence, and would also apply to when describing surroundings. The third device was the so-called "third person point of view" in the Jamesian sense, which is the technique of presenting every scene through the eyes of a particular character to the reader. Thus, the reader has the feeling of being "inside" the character's mind and experiencing the emotional reality of the scene as he experiences it. The fourth device involved recording everyday gestures, habits, manners and other symbolic details that might exist within a scene. It is a way of describing people's status and their position in the world, and was also a device utilised to make the reader feel as one with the character. The ambition for this break was to liven up the neutral voice of the "century-old

British tradition, as Wolfe expressed it, in which it was understood that the narrator shall assume a calm, cultivated and genteel voice." (Wolfe: 1973: 17) The aim was to bring new life and impose a bit of artistic license into journalism by trying to excite the reader both intellectually and emotionally regardless of use of literary techniques. (Wolfe: 1973: 15)

Journalism was the literary genre that dominated the 1960s and '70s, and during this period of time two new additions were made to the "family". Both New Journalism and Gonzo Journalism were highly controversial, which in a way could correspond to the experimental and alternative sentiment of that period. Tom Wolfe had gone as far as to boldly predict the death of the novel on account of non-fiction in the future. Although that prediction did not come true, the alternative spirit of the 1960s did open up for Hunter Thompson's extraordinary and highly popular approach. A high sense of personal involvement and use of controlled substances would be common denominators for Thompson's way of reporting, as well as the man himself. The word 'weird' has often been associated with Thompson, but among his peers he was still considered a respectable, hard-working journalist. Before the popularity of Gonzo Journalism occurred, he had been working as reporter for more than a decade among others on long assignments as a foreign news correspondent in South-America for the *National Observer* and *The Nation* as freelance journalist. His experiences abroad would eventually contribute to form some of the thematic aspects of Gonzo Journalism, as they would first and foremost give him a respect and affinity for foreign cultures, in addition to form a critical view on the American society and social sentiments. Thompson was a well-read man, and the ambition to become a fictional writer was always there. Among his literary heroes Ernest Hemmingway had been of a great inspiration, who had produced many articles as a literary journalist in the 1930s on the Spanish Civil War, as well as great novels. Whilst working in various locations all over South-

America, Thompson had spent a lot of time in San Juan, Puerto Rico, which would lead to one of his first attempts as a novelist. *The Rum Diary* was written sometimes during the early 1960s, but had remained unpublished until 1998<sup>2</sup>. The story is strictly fictional, although it deals with the life of Paul Kemp and his life as a newly-arrived journalist in San Juan. There are also multiple autobiographical elements of Thompson to be found in several of the main characters, which would become a common feature in the Gonzo productions to come. Although *The Rum Diary* is not Gonzo Journalism per se, it does however contain a description of the journalistic method of a Gonzo Journalist. “Yeamon had caught their mood perfectly. In twenty-six pages he had gone way beyond the story of why Puerto Ricans shove off for New York; in the end it was a story of why a man leaves home in the face of ugly odds, and when I finished it I felt small and silly for all the tripe I had written since I’d been in San Juan.” (Thompson: 1998: 62-63) Based on this passages it may be argued that Gonzo Journalism was not only a product or by-project by a New Journalist gone mad on drugs, but rather a journalistic technique Thompson developed alongside and hugely inspired by New Journalism.

Thompson’s career as a Gonzo journalist is generally recognised as having started with “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” written for *Scanlan’s Monthly* in 1970. There will be a thorough discussion on the techniques utilised in this article later in this chapter, but the main breakthrough with the article was that rather than being an observer to the scene of events, Thompson would take part in the story personally and actively. With the popularity of this article, Thompson’s writing style changed from a more or less New Journalistic stance into a Gonzo Journalistic stance, although the transition did not happen over night. An example of that would be the article “Strange Rumbblings in Aztlán”, which was written just after the Kentucky Derby

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<sup>2</sup> This year also marked the release of the film adaptation of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* directed by Terry Gilliam.

article, but was more or less a standard feature article in terms of language and journalistic stance. However, Thompson's big commercial breakthrough came just a few months later with *Fear and loathing in Las Vegas*, which still stands as his main literary achievement.

There is a variety of theories pertaining to the coining and etymology of the word 'Gonzo', and how it came to be connected with Thompson's new journalistic method. The word itself looks a little odd, and on a personal note the word strikes me as being a blend between the words 'gone' and 'crazy'. In this sense 'gone' would correspond to something outrageous with the equivalent semantic value of 'far out' or 'radical'. The word is thereby positively charged with a new and groundbreaking panache attached to it, which would correspond well with what people usually associated with both Thompson's personality and his writing style. Over the years a certain aura of mysticism would surround Thompson, and all the different theories helped perhaps to maintain this larger-than-life status. The most widely accepted theory is, although a bit imprecise, that the word was coined by Bill Cardoso as a reaction to Thompson's "Kentucky Derby" article. *"I don't know what the fuck you're doing, but you've changed everything. It's totally Gonzo"* (Carroll: 1993: 124). Cardoso was a Boston-based journalist and editor of The Boston Globe Sunday Magazine, and had met Thompson during the '68 primary election in New Hampshire. In the Boston Irish vernacular the word 'Gonzo' was used to describe: "the guts and the stamina of the last man standing at the end of a marathon drinking bout" (Whitmer: 1993: 168). In relation to the "Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" this would correspond with the fact that Thompson and Ralph Steadman had been as drunk, or even more drunk, than the other people attending the event. In the end, though, they had come through alive to tell the tale. "Gonzo wasn't so much a fact as a state of mind. If someone else was still on his feet drinking long after everyone else had dropped, he was 'Gonzo'. If a rock song was great, that was 'Gonzo'

too. And, as far as Cardoso was concerned, it was precisely the right adjective for Thompson's Derby piece. "That was pure Gonzo", he wrote. "You've broken through. Stay with it." And thus, however improbably, was the legend born" (Anson: 1981: 167). In Carroll's biography on Thompson Cardoso dismisses this theory, and presents a new theory of himself: "I think the word comes from the French Canadian. It's a corruption of g-o-n-z-e-a-u-x. Which is French Canadian for 'shining path'" (Carroll: 1993:124). In an article called "What is Gonzo? The etymology of an urban legend", Dr Martin Hirst digs deeper into the etymology of the word 'Gonzo'. He found no entry for the word 'gonzeaux' in any French dictionary, which contradicted one of Thompson's many versions. However, there might be some plausibility to the 'gonzeaux' theory. In "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" Thompson did see through all the unimportant and superficial facts about the race, and made a more meaningful social commentary on the event, which would correspond to a sense of shining path of truth. The results of Hirst's investigations also dismiss of two additional theories that suggest that etymologically 'Gonzo' may derive either from the Italian word 'Gonzo' which means literally a fool, or the Spanish word 'ganso' which means idiot or bumpkin. The latest and most plausible theory presented in *Gonzo: the Life of Hunter S. Thompson: An Oral Biography* by Rolling Stone Magazine editor and personal friend of Thompson's, Jann Wenner, argues that the word stems from a 1960 James Booker song called 'Gonzo'. Apparently Thompson had been absolutely mesmerized by the song, and had brought it along the '68 campaign trail. Much to Cardoso's growing aggravation he would play it over and over again resulting in Cardoso referring to Thompson as 'the Gonzo man' (Wenner & Seymour: 2007: 126). "The term "gonzo" was Cajun slang that had floated around the French Quarter jazz scene for decades and meant, roughly, to play unhinged" (Wenner & Seymour: 2007: 126).

To draw some kind of conclusion, it must be that whatever the origin of the word, it got a completely new and very broad meaning when it came to be associated with Thompson's



journalism. The semantic properties of the word are loosely suggested, and the semantic possibilities are still expanding. Back in 1970 when the word gathered momentum Thompson would perhaps not have foreseen that the ‘Gonzo’ would be used in an economics context. However, there is in fact now a term called *Gonzo marketing* which is used to describe unconventional and some times confrontational marketing strategies, which is outlined in Christopher Locke’s book called *Gonzo Marketing: Winning through Worst Practice*, and it demonstrates the immense possibilities and force of the word.

Regardless of what the word ‘Gonzo’ may or may not have denoted to previously the semantics of the word was forever changed when it came to be associated with Thompson’s unique way of writing. Gonzo Journalism was a complete process for Thompson, and there was a clear difference between the covering part and the editing part of a story. For the purpose of this thesis I will be calling the theory of the covering of the story for the ‘Gonzo intent’, and the production part as ‘Gonzo characteristics’.

“True *Gonzo* reporting needs the talents of a master journalist, the eye of an artist/photographer and the heavy balls of an actor. Because the writer *must* be a participant in the scene, while he’s writing it – or at least taping it, or even sketching it. Or all three” (Thompson: 1979: 114-115). Participation was the key issue when covering a story in order to gain the information that *he* was looking for. Even though he might have been unable to detect his surroundings due to either alcohol or drug intoxication, his mindset would still be in the correct mode, and via the live capture devices such as the tape recorder, it would still be possible to catch live bits of interaction for the story. Thus, he would employ these transcripts from the tape recorder directly into his articles, as they would be results of the investigations he had conducted while in the gonzo mode. In other words Gonzo Journalism was not only the coincidental

ramblings of a man imbued with mind-expanding drugs, but there was a clear method behind the process of covering a story. “Sorry to disappoint fans of the considerable Thompson Mythic Persona, but this is the work of a sober writer. Thompson’s self-deprecation, his occasional flights of fantasy, and his exaggeration of his drug use sometimes mask the fact that he is a brilliant stylist” (Chance & McKeen: 2001: 102-103). For Thompson the use of drugs was not merely a matter of addiction, but it was also a mean of reaching some higher illuminated state of mind and insights into cultural sides to the American society. This resulted in among others *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72*, which was, according to Frank Mankiewicz who was presidential candidate George McGovern’s campaign director that year: “...the most accurate and least factual account of that campaign” (Black & Thurman: 2006). The taboo connected to the use of drugs was perhaps one of the reasons why he became so popular among teenagers and outsiders of society, but Thompson separated leisure time and assignments with the process of writing. "But, when it came time to write, he put away most of the drugs and concentrated on his craft sculpting each sentence and paragraph with a care and precision that belied his seemingly crazed stream-of-consciousness prose" (Anson: 1981: 164). Another common denominator for Thompson’s stories was that they would begin and have a root in reality and real events, but once the Gonzo Journalist took control of the story there would be a shift into fiction so to speak, as there would be a greater deal of attention devoted to finding the story behind the story, rather than covering the initial event. The inspiration for ‘going Gonzo’ came from one of his literary idols: “It is a style of ‘reporting’ based on William Faulkner’s idea that the best fiction is far more *true* than any kind of journalism – and the best journalists have always known this” (Thompson: 1979d: 114).

Personal involvement is a commonly used characteristic when referring to Thompson’s

journalistic method, which was not groundbreaking in terms of journalism. However, Thompson's involvement went deeper, and he did not just restrict himself to act in terms of interior monologue or self-referencing commentary. One part of this personal involvement would be that he would gradually blend into the milieu he was writing about, and become part of the group he was writing about, rather than observing and commenting on an event. This way he would gain access to areas on the journalistic license, but at the same time enjoy the perspective of the common man. In *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* Thompson followed the election of the Democrats and in particular the campaign of George McGovern whom he had declared an affinity for. "The other, more complex, problem had to do with my natural out-front bias in favour of the McGovern candidacy..." (Thompson: 2006: 5). Thompson's edge on this close-to-a-year assignment was that he had already been part of an election campaign himself, as he had run for Sheriff in Aspen, Colorado a few years earlier. This had resulted in the article "Freak Power in the Rockies" (1970), which had given him invaluable information about the mechanics and processes taking place behind the curtain of an election camp.

Besides blending into the milieu Thompson, or one of his personas, would enter the story personally, and become a catalyst to the scene of events. By putting the main character in the position as main character, the story is directed into a more, to him, interesting area. This again would result in a change of content of the story. The classic example is "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved", which was initially supposed to be a story about a horse race, but turned from being about the winners and losers into dealing with the depraved and decadent state of the American mentality at that point in time. By putting the journalist at the centre of attention in the role as main character, there is necessarily a huge amount of self-referencing and autobiographical elements in his writing. Obviously a lot of the crazy experiences did in fact take place, but there is also a great amount of imaginary incidents. This has become a problem for

Thompson as his fans have come to misinterpret elements that belong to him personally and those elements that belong to his imagination.

Often in Thompson's Gonzo articles there is also the presence of a "sidekick" alongside the main character. The function of the sidekick was to bounce off or enhance some of the energy and attention the main character would muster when going into the frenzy of producing Gonzo Journalism. Thompson was undoubtedly a very demanding and complex man to be around, and would probably be even more impulsive when going into assignments with a "head full of acid". Rather than just being a single man's experiences the presence of a sidekick would add a stronger sense of credibility, and not just give the impression that it was all going on in his mind. He might have pushed his cohorts to their limits, at least when it comes to Ralph Steadman, but in the case of Oscar Acosta, referred by the narrator as Dr Gonzo whom he conspired with in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Thompson found perhaps a man that was even more out of it than himself.

Along with the personal involvement of Thompson in the stories came his lust for controlled substances. A central theme to his Gonzo writing was the use and description of various types of drugs both in terms of use and effects, whether it was alcohol or other more obscure drugs such as adrenochrome, which was allegedly made from the adrenaline gland of a living human being (Thompson: 2005: 131-132). Compared to Thompson's earlier works, these elements might have been mentioned, but once he crossed the line into being a Gonzo journalist both the amount of and effects of controlled substances became a considerable part of the narration. "... and confessed to his doctor that if he didn't use drugs, he would have the mind of a 'second-rate accountant'" (Anson: 1981: 164). Besides all the textual references to drugs and alcohol it also led to a detached and almost rambling story line as if the narrator *was* under the influence whilst mitigating the story to the reader. The alternative spirit of the 1960s and 1970s

was very lenient to the use of drugs, and LSD as a synthetic mind-expanding psychedelic drug, was declared illegal in the US as late as 1966. Some of the effects of this drug were recurring flashbacks and imagined events, which would correspond to the stream-of-consciousness rhythm to the story line in many of Thompson's articles.

Gonzo Journalism is in fact often referred to as stream-of-consciousness journalism, and on many occasions it may seem as if Thompson was covering the story by simply talking off the top of his head. "Gonzo writing is quite similar to stream-of-consciousness" (Bruce-Novoa: 1979: 41). However, given the characteristics of the Gonzo intent, this was all part of the plan. In the article "Fear and Loathing on the Buffalo Trail" this sense of story line is analysed into two elements called *constant digression* and *suspended coherence* (Bruce-Novoa: 1979: 41). In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* this first part can also be linked to all the mind-expanding drugs Thompson underwent during his assignment, whereas a thought or idea is rarely dwelt upon for more than a couple of sentences.

"I was asleep our plane hit the runway, but the jolt brought me instantly awake. I looked out the window and saw the Rocky Mountains. What the fuck was I doing *here*? I wondered. It made no sense at all. I decided to call my attorney as soon as possible. Have him wire me some money to buy a huge albino Doberman. Denver is a national clearing house for stolen Dobermans; they come from all parts of the country." (Thompson: 2005: 203)

The second part of the stream-of-consciousness technique is also employed frequently, as it would open up for both true and imaginary flashbacks, as well potential future events.

"When suddenly my head rolled back and my eyes glazed over and I felt myself sucked into an irresistible time-warp: I was standing at the bar in the clubhouse at Churchill Downs on Derby Day with Ralph Steadman, and we were drinking Mint Juleps at a pretty good pace, watching the cream of Bluegrass Society getting drunker and drunker out in front of us . . . It was between races, as I recall: Ralph was sketching and I was making notes ("3:45, Derby Day, standing at clubhouse now, just returned from Men's Room / terrible scene / whole place full of Kentucky Colonels vomiting into urinals & drooling bile down their seersucker pants-legs / Remind Ralph to watch for "distinguished-looking" men in pari-mutual lines wearing white-polished shoes with fresh vomit stains on the toes. . . .") (Thompson: Campaign trail: 395)

A final point connected to the stream-of-consciousness aspect to Thompson's writing style is the use of *imaginary digressions* that would "allow Thompson to invent some of his most

violent or insane passages” (Bruce-Novoa: 1979: 41). “The juxtaposition of real and imaginary events produces a type of equalizing osmosis, blurring the distinction in the reader’s mind” (Bruce-Novoa: 1979: 42).

Another important element in terms of stream-of-consciousness was the use of a live capture device. In the texts used for this thesis there is the use of a notebook, a tape recorder in addition to the sketches by Ralph Steadman to illustrate this point. The use of a tape recorder is of course a common tool for many journalists, but Thompson did not only use it for later references, but also as a tool to capture raw and unfiltered pieces of information while covering the story, and later employ directly into his articles. In *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* Thompson typed out transcripts from the tape recorder and inserted these passages straight from the typewriter directly into the finished manuscript, even though they contained spelling errors and written corrections made between the lines (Thompson: 2006: 429-431). This aspect of Thompson’s journalistic method can also be linked to his affinity for the Beat writers such as Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg and William Burroughs who sought spontaneity as one of their primary sources of inspiration. "Later, he travelled west, to California, learning the road, because that is what Kerouac had done, and he wanted to be like Kerouac" (Anson: 1981: 164). With respect to the use of this unfiltered information Thompson may be considered a ‘Beat journalist’.

So far some of the technical and more physical aspects of Thompson’s journalism have been analyzed, thus resulting in an assessment of the literary devices and techniques Thompson used to produce his Gonzo Journalism articles. Hyperbole is frequently used to convey elements of sarcasm and irony, and this device for exaggerated elements is especially frequent in the stories relating to stories involving drugs and alcohol. Thompson had a talent for creating new and unusual combinations of hyperbole, and it had been a favoured technique of his since the

New Journalist days. “It was like trying to keep track of a swimming meet in an Olympic-sized pool filled with talcum powder instead of water” (Thompson: 2005: 38). As Bruce-Novoa points out: “... the difference lies in that in a Gonzo piece Thompson does not try to explain the distortion to the reader, but rather leaves it as it stands, relying on irony to mitigate the chaos – if that is possible” (Bruce-Novoa: 1979: 42). Bruce-Novoa also introduces another frequently used literary device called the “juxtaposition of disparate levels of diction” (Bruce-Novoa: 1979: 42). It involves the mentioning of for instance a series of names or occurrences where one of the items clearly does not match the others. “In a nation of frightened dullards there is a sorry shortage of outlaws and those few who make the grade are always welcome: Frank Sinatra, Alexander King, Elizabeth Taylor, Raoul Duke . . . they have that extra something” (Thompson: 1967: 270).

When making a general comment on the use of prose language in general, one of the most important elements is the beautiful introductory sentences occurring in most of Thompson’s articles. As Yagoda & Kerrane reflect on in “The scum also rises”: “Thus he sets the opening scene in a driving summer rainstorm that sentimentally mirrors his own foul mood: a textbook use of the pathetic fallacy that would have done a Victorian novelist – or a pulp detective-story writer – proud” (Yagoda & Kerrane: 1997: 302). This feature is common for all three works used in this thesis, and can be found in other articles as well, such as in “A Southern City with Northern Problem”:

“Quino’s Café is on Market Street, two blocks up the hill from the river in the heart of Louisville’s legal and financial district, and often in the long damp Ohio Valley afternoons a lot of people who might ordinarily avoid such a place will find themselves stand at Quino’s white formica counter, drinking a Fehrs or a Falls City beer, and eating a ‘genuine twenty cent beercheese sandwich’ while they skim through an early edition of the Louisville Times.” (Thompson: 1979: 43-44)

Besides these literary devices there is also unorthodox use of punctuation, italics and a variety of new word units or neologisms. The aim of these various devices is, like the aim of Tom Wolfe and the New Journalists, to break up the stale rhetoric of standard journalism, and add a

new flavour and imagination to the language. In Thompson's case these devices not only build up to a rebellion against writing conventions, but also established a production of literary chaos. The stories are all based on real events, but once Thompson gets behind the wheel of the stories, the story simultaneously enters the realms of fiction and journalism through the aids of fictional devices.

The emergence of both New and Gonzo Journalism was a product of the work and ingenuity of the feature journalist ilk, which is an important point to make in this context. By borrowing the language of fiction the aim was not necessarily to steal the thunder of writers of fiction, but rather to make the journalistic language more vivid and less like "that pale beige tone", as Tom Wolfe would refer it to (Wolfe: 1973: 17). Whereas Gonzo Journalism was the product of one man, there were multiple journalists contributing to the New Journalism movement. Another difference between Gonzo Journalism and New Journalism is the matter of focal point. Although New Journalists like Tom Wolfe would enter the mind of a character and see the story through their eyes, they would still maintain an objective journalistic stance when it came to convey the subject matter of a story. Thompson on the other hand would simply omit the middle man, and put himself or one of his narrative voices in the role as main character in his stories, and be as subjective as possible. This is best exemplified in the difference in the 'journalistic intent' between Thompson and Wolfe's first respective Gonzo and New Journalistic production. Both were suffering from writer's block, but Thompson would simply hand in his notes of the events unedited to his publisher, whereas Wolfe on the other hand would make a *summary* of the events he had observed, and produce an article that experimented widely with use of fictional language and other devices. In Thompson's case the subjective influence was present *whilst* the story took place, whereas in Wolfe's case the majority of the personal touches on the



story took place whilst editing the story. “If (Timothy) Leary was the professor with the vision to inspire the youth to remake themselves, and the system, then Thompson was the scribe with the Remington Selectric typewriter to document the results while participating in the process” (Whitmer: 1993: 5) Common for both was that their editors would publish these products unedited, but Thompson’s approach would be even more unfiltered and personal than Wolfe’s. In an article on the motion picture of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Mark Olsen suggests a distinction between the two genres. "Gonzo Journalism, as defined and practiced by Thompson, is a sort of badly behaved younger brother to Tom Wolfe's New Journalism" (Olsen: 1999). Thompson had great respect for Wolfe, which comes out of the many letters they exchanged, but he did have some objections to his Wolfe's journalistic approach: “Wolfe’s problem is that he is too crusty to participate in his stories. The people he feels comfortable with are dull as stale dogshit, and the people who seem to fascinate him as a writer are so weird that they make him nervous” (Thompson: 1979: 116). John Hartsock made this observation: "Nonetheless, the common thread that connected earlier practitioners with the New Journalists remained the writer’s subjectivity and the motivation to narrow the distance between subject and object” (Hartsock: 2000: 198). In this respect Thompson’s approach did not just try to narrow the gap between subject and object, but rather successfully tried to merge the two by putting the reporter in the role as main character. Subjectivity rather than objectivity was the aim for Thompson, which can be linked to Thompson’s affinity to the Faulknerian idea as discussed in the element of Gonzo intent. “So much for Objective Journalism. Don’t bother to look for it in here – not under any byline of mine; or anyone else I can think of. With the possible exception of things like box scores, race results, and stock market tabulations, there is no such thing as objective Journalism. The phrase itself is a pompous contradiction in terms” (Thompson: 2006: 33). Gonzo Journalism involved employing the conventions of fictional language, and there would also be a change in

the content of the story from a report on a common event into an audacious personal endeavour

Despite the differences Thompson owes a lot of credit to New Journalism, as there would probably not have been room for his literary and physical escapades had it not been for New Journalism to have been there to pave the way. Through New Journalism new literary doors were opened, and the debate over the difference in status between fiction and journalism, and the academic value of the latter was moved from the newspaper office lunch room or writers' bars into the academic discussions table.

## Hell's Angels: the Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs

The 1960s has come to be one of the most eventful eras of modern American society with both contemporary and long-term social repercussions. Thompson had spent several years both abroad observing these trends taking place from a distance in the American society, but at the same time had sympathy and participated in the hippie movement. The dialogue of peace and love promoted by the hippie movement spread like an underground phenomenon from the west coast throughout the country to the entire world. Contrary to this positive and ideological movement there were also brute acts of violence being committed at the opposite end of the scale. The assassination of John F. Kennedy and the conflict at the Bay of Pigs were only some of the many examples of destructive events in this period. The emergence of outlaw motorcycle gangs suddenly exploded in the midst of this, and the most infamous of them all were the Hell's Angels. Unlike the peace and love generation this group promoted a dialogue of violence and terror, although both movements rebelled against the same authorities and shared in a sense some common ground. As Thompson documents in this book, both groups would be present and partake in experiments with LSD at parties at the house of the legendary Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters. "The difference between the student radicals and the Hell's Angels is that the students are rebelling against the past, while the Angels are fighting against the future. Their only common ground is their disdain for the present, or the *status quo*" (Thompson: 1967: 268). In stark contrast to the non-violent peace protesters these smelly, dirty short-tempered troublemakers thrived on the negative attention and nationwide exposure. "The long dormant Hell's Angels got eighteen years' worth of publicity in six months, and it naturally went to their heads" (Thompson:

1967: 44). However, the attitude to the negative public attention stagnated once the Angels realised that the media were making money off of their actions and statements without them getting their part of the share. This again led to a reduced interest for the Angels and, consequently, an even lesser interest in the accuracy of events pertaining to the Angels. Thus, there arose a need to set things straight and present the Angels' point of view, which is where Thompson came in to the picture.

Thompson's approach to the story was that he had been encouraged to write the story about the Hell's Angels by editor Carey McWilliams for the *Nation*, as there had been other articles on the subject in the media. Central to these articles and Thompson's to-be story was the so-called Lynch Report, which had been commissioned by California State senator Farr and conducted by Attorney General Thomas C. Lynch. The Lynch Report provided information on the Angels' criminal records and the total amount of crime they were responsible for. The aim of the report was to be a tool in the fight against the Angels. As a freelance and not a tabloid reporter Thompson was intrigued by the idea of writing about the Angels, especially when he came to realise that the report was grossly inaccurate in that it was only made up from questionnaires answered by hundreds of sheriffs, district-attorneys and police chiefs on Hell's Angels activities. There had not been gathered any information or statements from the Angels' point of view. The media on the other hand relied on the information accounted for in the Lynch report, and the average law enforcer again relied on the information provided for in the newspapers. "The deputies said they didn't know anything more about the outlaws than what they'd read on the papers" (Thompson: 1967: 242). Thompson saw perhaps an opportunity to set things straight about the Angels, and break the vicious circle that had indeed been formed. In a letter to *Nation* editor Carey McWilliams prior to making the article, Thompson wrote: "Tomorrow or the next day I'll try to see some of the cycle people; I can't imagine doing a story

without their point of view” (Thompson: 1998b: 497). The article was published on May 17, 1965, and was to become Thompson’s commercial breakthrough as a journalist with nationwide acclaim. The book presents an overall historic picture of the Hell’s Angels from the first establishment of the first chapter in Fontana, California in 1948, to the infamous rape case at Monterey in 1965 that subsequently spiralled of a series of scandals that were associated with the Angels.

Even though Gonzo Journalism is associated with the name Hunter S. Thompson, this book does not fall in under that category. However, there are some elements in this text that bare witness of a growing Gonzo journalist, and this book may be labelled as the premature birth of Gonzo Journalism. As in the later Gonzo articles the personal involvement would be a key issue into getting under the skin of the Angels. For the purpose of this project, however, it would have been counter-productive for Thompson’s story to be a savage catalyst in the midst of outlaw motorcyclists. When he *does* make a personal comment as narrator, it is often placed in parenthesis. When addressing the issue of raising money for a film project on behalf of the Angels, Thompson states: "(God knows I tried, and the Angels still blame me for blowing that two grand they wanted, but the sad truth is that [...] just wouldn't pay . . .)" (Thompson: 1967: 63). Thompson’s advantage over other journalists was that he became friends with Birney Jarvis, who was at the time a reporter for the San Francisco Chronicle, and an ex-Angel. Through this connection Thompson got a little rapport with the Angels, and it was Thompson’s big opportunity to blend into the milieu. Despite this contact with Jarvis, the majority of the work for being accepted by the group had to be made by him personally. Another reason why the Angels to a certain degree accepted Thompson was that he had agreed to write an honest and truthful account from their point of view. His man’s man personality suited the macho Angel environment

perfectly, although there would always be a certain amount of scepticism towards him. Part of Thompson's journalistic method for this piece was that in order to obtain and absorb information, and rather than sticking out as a sore thumb he would gradually become one of the boys. Throughout the experience Thompson would become increasingly more a part of the group than perhaps even the Angels might have expected themselves. He obtained previously unattainable information and invaluable insights as a journalist, and was in the position to simultaneously compare the image of the Angels with articles relating to the same issues in other newspapers and magazines. "It would be useless to try to list these failures, and besides that the purpose of this harangue is not to nail any one newspaper or magazine – but to point out the potentially massive effect of any story whose basic structure is endorsed and disseminated not only by *Time* and *Newsweek*, but by the hyper-prestigious *New York Times*" (Thompson: 1967: 43). One of the techniques Thompson used to avoid falling into the scoop journalist trap, so to speak, was to refer to the Angels by either their first names or their nicknames. By doing so he would make them appear more like individual beings, rather than a group entity, which was the case of the tabloid media. The scoop journalists were especially inaccurate on this part he felt, but sadly the more established newspapers and magazines had also fallen for this temptation. Another surprising effect of the scoop coverage of the Angels phenomenon was that rather than create some sort of menacing image of the Angels, and thus prevent people from approaching or getting into contact with them, it had created a myth-like status of them. It made it more tempting for the common man to try to provoke and get into fights with them, and others found their vigilante and cult-like appealing more intriguing than discouraging. In order to blend into the milieu and gain a level of confidence with the Angels, he would among other things buy a motorcycle, although not a hot one despite several good and tempting offers from the Angels. He would on several occasions have the Angels come over to his house in San Francisco where he lived at the time, and

eventually he would be subject to an Angel greeting ritual among others. “While I was reaching in my pocket for some beer money I was nearly knocked of my feet by a flying body that wrapped itself around me before I could see who it was. . . . Then I felt the hairy kiss and heard the laughter” (Thompson: 1967: 207). Ultimately he would gain a deeper understanding of the processes taking place within the group and with their relationship with the media. Thompson also gained insight in Angel vernacular for instance when it came to technical information about motorcycles or, in a totally different context, what constitutes an angel “mama”. “Several times when I was looking for somebody I was told ‘He’s hiding to crash’ . . . but crashing means nothing more sinister than going on the nod, either from booze or simple fatigue” (Thompson: 1967: 205). “A widely quoted section of the Lynch report says these girls are called ‘sheep’, but I never heard an Angel use that word. It sounds like the creation of some police inspector with intensely rural memories” (Thompson: 1967: 177). Another example of the kind of information Thompson would attain as a result of this blending in to the milieu was how the relationships between Angels within the group as well as to outsiders were structured. One of the favourite activities of the Angels was to scare people by gunning their motorcycles as ferociously as possible, and as a general standpoint it can be said that their attitude towards others were dubious at best. There were some rare exceptions, but the Angels were usually hostile towards all other groups of people except themselves. That would involve Blacks, Jews and of course homosexuals. As Thompson points out was the policy of the group, but there were in fact multiple cases of homosexual activity between Angels, and between Angels and outsiders. Reasons for exposing some of the members in this fashion had perhaps something to do with the unhappy parting between Thompson and the Angels. Consequently, he did not miss opportunities to slip in elements of irony on the Angels’ behalf. “To whatever extent the Hell’s Angels may or may not be latent sado-masochists or repressed homosexuals is to me – after nearly a year in the

constant company of outlaw motorcyclists – almost entirely irrelevant” (Thompson: 1967: 93). The stomping he received from the Angels, which ultimately led to the end of the exchange of information, had its natural effect on Thompson’s overall perception of the outlaw motorcyclists, which had its consequences on the editing part of the story.

Eventually Thompson’s involvement would give him problems with maintaining an objective stance. “That was in early spring of 1965. By the middle of summer I had become so involved in the outlaw scene that I was no longer sure whether I was doing research on the Hell’s Angels or being slowly absorbed by them (Thompson: 1967: 55). As the ending suggests he was never completely incorporated into the Angel network, but along the way he was accepted to a much higher extent than other journalists had been before him. Altogether Thompson would spend close to a year together with the outlaws, and in the process he was often mistaken for an Angel himself. “I hadn’t planned to get physically involved, but after [a] narrow escape at [ ... ] I was so firmly identified with the Angels that I saw no point in trying to edge back to neutrality” (Thompson: 1967: 151). Keeble and Wheeler make the following assumption: “His first book, *Hell’s Angels: A strange and terrible saga* (1967), was pretty much standard journalism. Apart from one important factor: Thompson became part of the action. For a year he rode with the Angels, went home with the Angels, chronicled the sex lives of the Angels. There was no pretence here at traditional journalism’s objectivity. His fiercely subjective style reached parts of society no other journalist reached” (Keeble & Wheeler: 2007: 136). Although it must have been tempting to write derogatorily about the Angels, I would disagree with Keeble and Wheeler on this point. Thompson *did* manage to remain objective stance throughout his experience with the Angels. He presented his behind-the-scenes account of what he went through, but refrained from the savage subjectivity and personal involvement, which could have been the case had the Gonzo journalist broken through. In the editing part of the book, however, there are signs of a subjective



force behind the typewriter, but as discussed earlier the gonzo intent of Thompson did not include a “fiercely subjective style”. In the postscript of the book, though, the subjective journalist in Thompson comes out when he announces what should be done with the Angels. In a passage borrowed from Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* he blurts out in a fit of anger; "... I tried to compose a fitting epitaph. I wanted something original, but there was no escaping the echo of Mistah Kurtz's comment from the heart of darkness: 'The horror! The Horror . . . Exterminate all the brutes! . . . But after getting such a concentrated jolt of reality I was not much concerned about justice' (Thompson: 1967: 284).

When it comes to the use of controlled substances drugs and the tape recorder in the book, they do not have the same function as in the later Gonzo productions, but rather remain secondary to the main story. In a Gonzo production Thompson would use drugs personally and let the mindset he would get from the effect of the drugs directly influence the way his texts would be presented. In this book, however, it is mainly the Angels who use and are described while using controlled substances, and it does not have an affect the story line or the narrative voice.

The tape recorder has a specific function in a gonzo production, but in this case it is merely mentioned as a source of background information and anecdotes. “Around eleven I ducked into the car and worked for a while on the tape, but my monologue was constantly interrupted by people reaching through the back windows and trying to wrench the trunk open” (Thompson: 1967: 176). Unlike in a Gonzo production the tape transcriptions do not add to the stream-of-consciousness sense of the text.

There *are* several elements of gonzo techniques in this story, but there is one crucial part missing. It fails to meet the Gonzo intent. The journalist only covers the role as observer and narrator, and he is not main character of the story. There is no direct connection between what is

experienced as journalist, and what is produced textually. On the other hand it meets the qualifications of New Journalism in that it employs literary devices when telling a non-fiction story. It was also published during the golden years of New Journalism in respect of the time and the place, and Thompson had established contact with several of the other New Journalists through letters and meetings. He also had a deep respect for the writing of Tom Wolfe, despite the different taste in journalistic approach. *Hell's Angels* was commissioned after a number of articles, including one by Thompson, and he based his book on these articles and meetings with the Hell's Angels. The success of Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* had increased the demand for these kinds of stories among publishing houses, and *Hell's Angels* ended up selling 500,000 copies in 1968 alone, which was a substantial number of copies for a non-fiction book at the time. What the book lacks in intense personal involvement, it gains in terms of some beautiful passages of prose. This was part of Thompson's "edge", which he would carry over to the Gonzo articles a few years later. The book itself is like a pastiche of different genres with elements of literary language, which corresponds with the devices employed by New Journalists. "I saw them coming before I heard the noise ... and suddenly they were right next to the car, filling the sunshine peace of the morning with a roar that drowned out the radio" (Thompson: 1967: 125). When commenting on the stomping some of Thompson's irony is displayed in a metaphor: "There was no vocal aftermath, then or later. I didn't expect one – no more than I'd expect a pack of sharks to explain their feeding frenzy" (Thompson: 1967: 283). There are also examples of complete dialogues between Thompson and people he met during his experiences with the Angels. There are citations from complete articles to prominent political personalities to Average Joes, in addition to lines from song lyrics and poems (Thompson: 1967: 123 and 206). The most typical trait of New Journalism in this piece is the scope and focal point of the narrator. Although he is usually present personally in many of the scenes described, Thompson still maintains his

objective stance. Dialogues between Thompson and the Angels are often retold in full, and they are intertwined in other passages and descriptions. "Another man, also wearing Bermudas, sidled up to me and asked quietly: 'Say, are you guys really Nazis?' 'Not me,' I said. 'I'm Kiwanis.' He nodded wisely, as if he had known all along" (Thompson: 1967: 153).

In terms of chronology, the story does follow Thompson's experiences with the Angels from the first initiatives, to the near-fatal end. However, the story is more constructed like a selection of anecdotes, articles and nuggets of information on the Angels and their place in society. The book does not tell one story, but is rather a recount of the author's experiences with the Angels, and pieces of information he uncovered on the way. In other words the story is told by shifting from scene to scene, which was also a dominant technique of the New Journalists.

After reading the first couple of sentences the book may appear to be a mix of a Victorian novel with a 1960s vernacular (Yagoda & Kerrane: 1997:302). There are multiple descriptions of naturalistic elements intertwined with motorcycle references, like; "California, Labour Day weekend... early, with ocean fog still in the streets, outlaw motorcyclists wearing chains ..." and "...like Ghengis Khan on an iron horse, a monster steed with fiery anus, flat out through the eye of a beer can and up your daughter's leg with no quarter asked and none given" bare witness of a clash between two worlds, which in many ways symbolise how the Angels functioned in connection with the rest of society (Thompson: 1967: 13). Although he carried out an objective stance when interacting with the Angels, he would slip in these subliminal messages to the reader as to his real stand point that had formed based on the departure with the Angels in the editing process of the book. An example of this is when Thompson makes an analysis of the hierarchy within the group: "Despite their swastika fetish, the fiscal relationship between Angels is close to pure communism: 'from each according to his abilities and each according to his needs'" (Thompson: 1967: 146). The true hierarchy of the Angels was that there was a large degree of

anarchism within the Angels, and the sense of a group identity was only a cover-up in order to intimidate others from getting into fights or in other ways threaten their supremacy. By travelling in a pack it would also be less tempting for the police to pull them over when they were riding in a pack of up to 2,000 individuals.

As other New Journalists, Thompson would employ a number of metaphors in the text. A characterisation of the macho and male-oriented image throughout the book could be as follows: “People ran out of taverns and dry-goods stores to stare at these fabled big-city Huns” (Thompson: 1967: 21). Thompson had a talent for inventing and refining new combinations of hyperbole, which can be seen in virtually all his works and served as an important tool to convey his satirical humour. Another example of this is: “As the weekend began, the atmosphere at Bass Lake was reminiscent of a Kansas hamlet preparing for a tornado” (Thompson: 1967: 116). In the article “Fear and loathing on the Buffalo Trail” Bruce-Novoa makes the conclusion that the difference between the use of hyperbole in *Gonzo Journalism* versus those in *Hell’s Angels* lies in that in the latter the hyperbole is explained, whereas in the *Gonzo* articles they are not and left to irony to mitigate the true meaning. An example of this feature is: “The laws they made to preserve a myth are no longer pertinent; the so-called American way begins to seem like a dyke made of cheap cement, with many more leaks than the law had fingers to plug” (Thompson: 1967: 268).

This example leads into one of the major themes of the book, as well as Thompson’s bibliography as well, as it comments on the corrupted state, and ultimate death, of the American Dream. This ideal promises success in exchange for hard work and believing in a dream. This notion was demonstrated in novels by for instance Horatio Alger with his “rags-to-riches” stories, and is made a target of satire for Thompson. When referring to marijuana, Thompson comments:

“If Horatio Alger had been born near a field of locoweed his story might have been a lot different” (Thompson: 1967: 221). As people have different perceptions of success, the level of success is consequently different from person to person. In the case of the Hell’s Angels their level of success would be measured in their position in society. Being rootless individuals there is a sense of a repressed inferiority complex to be read in the Angels. “As individuals they have been busted, excluded and defeated in so many ways that they are not about to be polite or careful in the one area where they have an edge” (Thompson: 1967: 101). However, the aim of the Angels was not to conform to society, and subsequently climb up the social ladder. They wanted to *remain* outlaws, as well as being liberal individualists, and to split with the consequences and established rules and norms. “I could almost hear the song when Barger left off with: ‘We Angels live in our own world. We just want to be left alone to be individualists’” (Thompson: 1967: 208). There was no honour in the Angels way of achieving their version of the American Dream, and there was no honour for the short duration of time when they were living the in it. “‘There’s only two kinds of people in the world,’ Magoo explained one night. ‘Angels, and people who wish they were Angels’” (Thompson: 1967: 266). Although the American Dream is considered a personal goal, the Angels tried to achieve it collectively. They sought strength in numbers, as it was the basis for their whole existence. “They are intensely aware of belonging, of being able to depend on each other” (Thompson: 1967: 83). In other words the Angels were dominated by a strong sense of pragmatism, which leads into the key point of the book. In terms of the American Dream the Hell’s Angels represented the new generation of success-seekers in that they would walk over bodies, quite literally, to attain their share of the dream and success. Despite their background as underdogs and counter-culture icons, the Angels simply wanted to continue their way of destruction even after getting their fifteen minutes of fame. The media involuntarily contributed to the realisation of this notion through their coverage of the Angels. Rather than

discourage people from getting involved with the Angels, the media made the Angels into anti-heroes and an underground cult phenomenon.

"One afternoon as I sat in the El Adobe and watched an Angel sell a handful of barbiturate pills to a brace of pimply punks no more than sixteen I realized that the roots of this act were not in any time-honoured American Myth but right beneath my feet in a new kind of society that is only beginning to take shape. To see Hell's Angels as caretakers of the old 'individualist' tradition 'that made this country great' is only a painless way to get around seeing them for what they really are - not some romantic leftover, but the first wave for a future that nothing in our history has prepared us to cope with. The Angels are prototypes." (Thompson: 1967: 265)

The outlaw motorcycle gangs were a product of time in that their formation as a group was first of all to find some kind common grounds with other people. The notion of the American Dream was still a part of the prosperous American society, and it had been rewritten through the peace & love generation as an ideal to aspire to. Being outsiders to society this opportunity was perhaps not so obvious to the Angels, and they would come to represent a destructive approach to the American Dream.

## The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved

This article has become known as the first piece of Gonzo Journalism, and it was published in June 1970 for *Scanlan's Monthly*, which was a magazine that published articles written by New Journalists. Thompson's starting point was that this was going to be an objective article on the behind-the-scenes events on the famous horse race grandly called "The Run for the Roses", which is held annually in Louisville, Kentucky. However, there was a background story that would make it impossible for him to remain neutral. Unlike common perception Thompson was a very sensitive man, and recently before covering the Kentucky Derby there had been two incidents that would have a deep impact on him; the shootings at Kent State which caused four deaths, eight people got wounded and one was paralyzed, and the government's decision to engage in air strikes against Cambodia, thus, expanding the Vietnam War. The prelude to the Kent State shootings was that the Ohio National Guard had been summoned to monitor peace protesters. One of the fears was that Black Panthers might show up and invoke a riot. The theories as to why the Guardsmen started firing their weapons as plentiful, but the fact of the matter is that innocent students, many of them not even participating in the protests, suffered the most tragic of outcomes. After the Kentucky Derby weekend he would end up in a writer's block due to dwelling on these events, which indirectly would have an impact on his career as a Gonzo journalist. Another circumstance that would make an impact on Thompson prior to the Kentucky Derby weekend was the fact that an article he had written for *Playboy* on Jean-Claude Killy which had been rejected at the last minute (Wolfe: 1973: 172). Together these events would muster a great deal of anger and despair in Thompson, and he used these emotions directly and to his own advantage when covering this story. However, what would have the most effect on the outcome of the story was the fact that Thompson was back in his childhood town from which he

had been more or less banished at the age of 16. Together with some friends Thompson had been involuntarily dragged into a stick-up, and was put on trial with two others. Eventually Thompson got the better part of the blame because the others guys had influential fathers, and he was given the option of jail time or joining the Air Force. He chose the latter, and had not looked back at Louisville until the Kentucky Derby weekend. He was, in other words, biased before taking on the assignment, and it was to be this personal anger and commitment that would make him shine in this first ever Gonzo article. Fueled on alcohol and a personal grudge against Louisville the result was “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved”.

The Kentucky Derby is an important horse race and a venerable tradition in the US, but compared to the military escalations in Cambodia and the fatal shootings of innocent students at Kent State that year, it seemed insignificant in the big picture. Perhaps there was an element of disappointment in Thompson’s to the lack of compassion of these tragic events in his former townsmen that made him react so aggressively and personally in this story. As a native Louisvillian he would have no problem with blending into the milieu, and thus obtain both the privileges and liberties of a reporter in addition to the know-how of a local. Objectivity in a situation like this may not ever have been possible, but as a reporter that was supposed to be his starting point. In New Journalism this objectivity was ensured even when using the downstage voice, but in this story Thompson entered the scene *personally* and ruled out the need and use of a middle man to mitigate the story. One of the results of the presence of a personal and highly subjective entity as main character in the story was that there would be a change in the content of the story. Fueled up on alcohol with a side kick in Ralph Steadman, Thompson focused his attention on the people attending the show and tried to get to the story behind the story, rather than make a report on the horse race. As a freelance journalist working on behalf of a magazine



that specialised in New Journalist articles, this was expected as well. However, the presence of and the degree of subjective involvement by Thompson in this article was something quite extraordinary and groundbreaking for investigative journalism. From being a neutral observer, he ended up being a catalyst to the story, and took it into new directions as he saw fit. There was a change in the content of the story's outline, and in the case of this article the story behind the story was to find, as the title suggests, a picture or image which would illustrate what was decadent and depraved with the Kentucky Derby. Thompson insisted that it would be "that special kind of face that I felt we would need for the lead drawing. It was a face I'd seen a thousand times at every Derby I'd ever been to. . . . a pretentious mix of booze, failed dreams and a terminal identity crisis; the inevitable result of too much inbreeding in a close and ignorant culture" (Thompson: 1979b: 35-36). In other words he was looking for the face that would correspond to a person who was seeking out the American Dream on the wrong premises, who really was "decadent and depraved". Further down the page he continues: "So the face I was trying to find in Churchill Downs that weekend was a symbol in my own mind, of the whole doomed atavistic culture that makes the Kentucky Derby what it is" (Thompson: 1979b: 36). Towards the end of the article Thompson comes to the realisation that the character he had been looking for was, sadly enough, looking right back at him in the mirror. "There he was, by God – a puffy, drink-ravaged, disease-ridden caricature . . . like an awful cartoon version of an old snapshot in some once-proud mother's family photo album. It was the face we'd been looking for – and it was, of course, my own. Horrible, horrible . . ." (Thompson: 1979b: 42). Very much like Mr Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* Thompson comes to a moment of clarity and self-realisation, which fills him with horror and disgust. Interestingly enough this is also one of the ending passages from *Hell's Angels* only here it is used ironically rather than as a genuine description. Later in the article Steadman is quoted on the same kind of enlightenment. "You

know – I’ve been thinking about that,’ he said. ‘We came down here to see this teddible scene: people all pissed out of their minds and vomiting on themselves and all that . . . and now, you know what? It’s us . . .’” (Thompson: 1979b: 43). Not only had the culture which the two resented so strongly caught up with the people attending the Kentucky Derby, but it had also caught up with them personally without their knowledge.

The production of this article also fulfils the requirement of the Gonzo intent as described in chapter one, as the story is to a very large extent written as it actually happened with all its impulsive and original twists and turns. At the same time there was a plan behind the covering of the story. “Probably the closest analogy to the ideal would be a film director/producer who writes his own scripts, does his own camera work and somehow manages to film himself in action, as the protagonist or at least a main character” (Thompson: 1979d: 115). In this comparison the producer would correspond to a writing journalist, the camera work will correspond to a live capture device and the impulsive and unpredictable actions of the actor will correspond to a journalist being a major player or the catalyst to the story. In this case the story came hot off the press so to speak, as it was made directly out of Thompson’s notebook. This is supported by the editing of the story as he had run into a writer’s block while dwelling on the terrible shootings at Kent State of students protesting against the decision to invade Cambodia. The editors at *Scanlan’s* were going to print it as their cover story, and were sending over copyboys to Thompson’s hotel suite, and “...out of futility, he gave them handwritten notes from his notepad. An hour later a copyboy was back, asking for more. Thompson was disbelieving. He called Hinckle in San Francisco, who said the stuff was wonderful. Thompson sent the entire notepad over the Telecopier, then slunk back to Aspen, feeling tawdry over his butchered effort at investigative journalism” (Whitmer: 1993: 168).

The story line of this article is presented in a broken and almost deconstructed way. One of the reasons for this is of course was that it was based on notes, but another reason is that both main characters were in a drunken stupor for the better part of the weekend, and were simply unable to recollect what they had gone through. “From that point on – almost from the very moment we started out to the track – we lost all control of events and spent the rest of the weekend churning around in a sea of drunken horrors. My notes and recollections from Derby Day are somewhat scrambled.” (Thompson: 1979b: 38) The use of an unedited notepad can also be linked with the sketches made of Ralph Steadman, that would also be part of capturing unfiltered and raw information to the story. As the alcohol would affect their sense of perception and ability to make notes, these devices would turn out to be invaluable, yet at the same time add a touch of truth and reality to the actual events during that weekend.

In compliance with New Journalism, the use of novelistic devices is also prominent in this article. The use of innovative onomatopoeia was a specific technique belonging to Tom Wolfe, but apart from that there was use several orthographic and stylistic devices. There is use of three dots in the story line to emphasise or indicate a pause between two statements, which has the effect that the narrator, or the interior monologue of the main character, speaks directly to the readers. Thereby it adds a certain directness and unfiltered sense to the story line of the article. The use of metaphoric language and especially hyperbole is as always present in Thompson’s productions. Through these devices he is able to transmit some of his humour, which can be seen as another element of personal involvement. “And unlike most of the others in the press box, we didn’t give a hoot in hell what was happening on the track. We had come there to watch the *real* beasts perform.” (Thompson: 1979b: 35) “...fat slanted eyes and a pimp’s smile, blue silk suit and his friends looking like crooked bank tellers on a binge ...” (Thompson: 1979b: 39) Sarcasm

is also widely used, especially when denoting to people of his own Southern heritage.

In the beginning of the article Thompson encounters a Texan in the airport bar, and as he states later on: “Anyone who wanders around the world saying, ‘Hell yes, I’m from Texas’, deserves whatever happens to him” (Thompson: 1979b: 31). The Texan “who said his name was something or other – ‘but just call me Jimbo’ – and he was here to get it on” was exactly the stereotypical Southerner Thompson was out to satirize that weekend (Thompson: 1979b: 29). Obviously annoyed by the obnoxious behaviour of ‘Jimbo’, Thompson makes up a story that he is attending the Kentucky Derby to get photos on behalf of Playboy of an upcoming riot to be started by the Black Panthers. In a subtle way Thompson starts to make fun of Jimbo by spicing up the already imaginary digression, and drag the story further and further. The satire here lies in the connection to the shootings at Kent State, and how Jimbo reacts wrongly, although in sync with the general, slightly racist perhaps, Southern mentality to the Black Panthers. Rather than making the connection with the tragic event, Jimbo is more concerned with a potential riot happening to his beloved Kentucky Derby.

Another point of satire and comical effect is how Thompson goes into the redneck character towards the end of the story as he drops Steadman off at the airport. “The journalist rams the big car through traffic and into a spot in front of the terminal, then he reaches over to open the door on the passenger’s side and shoves the Englishman out, snarling: ‘Bug off, you worthless faggot! You twisted pigfucker! (Crazed laughter.) If I weren’t sick I’d kick your ass all the way to Bowling Green – you scumsucking foreign geek. Mace is too good for you . . . We can do without your kind in Kentucky” (Thompson: 1979b: 43). “As an image, the Derby is a metaphor for the country: the track isolates an event that runs in a circle for the introverted entertainment of the masses and the financial benefit of the rich and the criminal element...” (Bruce-Novoa: 1979: 40).

The Kentucky Derby is a sports event with long traditions, which people would return to year after year. At the same time Louisville is a very secluded place, and Thompson's reasons for taking such a satirical and sarcastic approach to the Kentucky Derby was that, in his opinion at least, Louisville existed in a loop hole in time where racism, inbreeding and a reluctance to take an interest in what is happening in the country and the rest of the world for that matter. In a passage Thompson discusses the differences between inbreeding in horses and humans: "But the breeding of humans is not so wisely supervised, particularly in a narrow Southern society where the closest kind of inbreeding is not only stylish and acceptable, but far more convenient – to the parents – than setting their offspring free to find their own mates, for their own reasons and in their own ways" (Thompson: 1979b: 36). In a slightly disturbing image Thompson points out that Louivillians and the people attending the Kentucky Derby were not the free spirits seeking out individual liberty, but rather were the sheep of America following the call of the corrupt leaders of the nation. "Why not? Money is a good thing to have in these twisted times. Even Richard Nixon is hungry for it. Only a few days before the Derby he said, 'If I had any money I'd invest it in the stock market.' And the market, meanwhile, continued its grim slide" (Thompson: 1979b: 31). The conversation between Thompson and Jimbo illustrates well this stereotype, and how poorly enlightened many of the people of the south were. The Kent State shootings for instance had obviously not hit Jim hard enough for him not to be lured into Thompson's little game of mockery. Another example of Louisville living in a loop hole in time is when Thompson picks up a copy of the Courier Journal at the airport, which is the local newspaper belonging to Louisville. The headlines on the front page were among others: "'Nixon sends GIs into Cambodia to hit Reds' and 'B-52s Raid, then 2,000 GIs Advance 20 Miles' and a story Diane Crump who would be the first woman jockey ever to ride the race" (Thompson: 1979b: 30). Apart from that "'There was no mention of any trouble brewing at a University in Ohio called Kent State'" (Thompson:

1979b: 30). The Kentucky Derby is in other words an introverted event taking place in an introverted community, and Thompson was infuriated that people attending the Kentucky Derby was not taking any interest in the rest of society apparently. He put the race in an unfavourable perspective first and foremost to provoke reactions in the readers and those who held the race dearly. Secondly he would be able to expose the true nature of the Kentucky Derby, and set many of the Southern traditions and ways of life up for a critical and satirical treatment.

As in *Hell's Angels* the idea of the American Dream is all an important part of the background of this article, and the decadent and depraved state of the Kentucky Derby is merely a symptom of the poor state of the American Dream. The drunken Southern Colonels and the inbred, ignorant Louisvillians are only part of the problem. The role as the main corruptor of this image falls on the owner of the winning horse on Derby Day. "... a dapper little man named Lehmann who said he had just flown into Louisville that morning from Nepal, where he'd 'bagged a record tiger'" (Thompson: 1979b: 41). Obviously Mr Lehmann was pretty well off as it was, and probably did not even need the \$127, 000 he made from the victory after having only invested \$6,500 two years ago. It was this sense of greed and admiration for this greed that Thompson objected to so intensely. "The sportswriters murmured their admiration and a waiter filled Lehmann's glass with Chivas Regal" (Thompson: 1979b: 41). Rather than going through the toils of honest and hard work, there was now a relentless drive in the American society to always going for the easy money. This was perhaps one of the biggest symptoms for the corrupted state of the American Dream, and it is very well demonstrated in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. From being the land of opportunities, the majority of American people had gradually moved from believers in these possibilities into becoming a blasé nation of underachievers.

The blame for this negative trend is in this story, as well as many other articles in

Thompson's bibliography, is given to president Richard Nixon. Rather than encourage people to pursue their own dreams and succeed as a result of their own efforts, Nixon would spread an agenda of greed, and which would ultimately be the end of the liberal spirit that thrived during the 1960s. The relationship between Thompson and former president Richard Nixon was mutually hostile, and Nixon in many ways was one of Thompson's greatest sources of inspiration. This, of course, was not complimentary, but interestingly enough it is fascinating to observe that Thompson's writing lost some of its momentum prior to Nixon's death. Thompson's farewell speech to Nixon sealed their relationship in which he announced that he believed Nixon had corrupted and irreparably tainted the American soul, but he also confirms his belief in an involved journalist. "Some people will say that words like scum and rotten are wrong for Objective Journalism -- which is true, but they miss the point. It was the built-in blind spots of the Objective rules and dogma that allowed Nixon to slither into the White House in the first place. He looked so good on paper that you could almost vote for him sight unseen. He seemed so all-American, so much like Horatio Alger, that he was able to slip through the cracks of Objective Journalism. You had to get Subjective to see Nixon clearly, and the shock of recognition was often painful" (Thompson: 1995: 243).

## Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream

*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was originally published in two issues of Rolling Stone Magazine published in November 1971, and it was based on a trip Thompson made with his friend and Chicano attorney Oscar Zeta Acosta. However, in the story Thompson works under the alias Raoul Duke, and Acosta on the other hand is described as Duke's 250-pound Samoan attorney called Dr Gonzo. This way of keeping the characters' real names secret was only halfway attempted, and one giveaway that Acosta was synonymous with Dr Gonzo, although he was made Samoan and not Chicano, is found in the infamous bathtub scene: "He rolled his eyes for a moment, then tried to smile. "Who said anything about slicing you up?" he mumbled. "I just wanted to carve a little Z on your forehead – nothing serious" (Thompson: 2005: 61). The Z here would then correspond to Acosta's middle name. The prelude to the trip was that Thompson was writing a story about the assassination of columnist Ruben Salazar, who was part of the Chicano movement in California like Acosta himself. Thompson was writing an article about this topic, which eventually would be published in April 1971 for *Rolling Stone Magazine* and went under the title "Strange Rumbblings in Aztlán". Acosta had personally become a central figure in the Brown Power debate, and engaged heavily in the resulting controversy after Salazar's murder. Thompson's involvement in the Salazar case was first and foremost triggered by the fact that a fellow reporter had been killed, but even more that Acosta accused the LA police of having deliberately killed him in cold blood. "When the cops declare open season on journalists, when they feel free to declare any scene of 'unlawful protest' a free fire zone, that will be a very ugly day – and not just for journalists" (Thompson: 1979e: 137) In the "Jacket Copy for Fear and



Loathing in Las Vegas” Thompson confesses to having been “a ball of nerves & sleepless paranoia (figuring that *I* might be next)...” (Thompson: 1979d: 113). He had suggested that he and Acosta, whom he had known for some time, went to Las Vegas where Thompson had been invited to write a story for *Sports Illustrated* on a motorcycle race. The idea was that the trip would make them both more relaxed, and Thompson would be able to obtain some information from Acosta for his article. Albeit somewhat exaggerated the trip they made would be immortalized in these two articles.

*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* stands as Thompson’s most famous literary achievement, and has been compared to Tom Wolfe’s *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* and William Burroughs’ *Naked Lunch* as one of the best pieces to come out of the drug culture of the 1960s and 1970s. “There are only two adjectives writers care about ... “Brilliant” and “Outrageous”. Hunter Thompson has a freehold of both of them. *Fear and Loathing* is a scorching epochal sensation.” (Tom Wolfe on the Back cover of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*) From page one there are drug references in all shapes, sizes and forms, and the story is about two “bold” men and their search for the American Dream on a savage journey into the physical and metaphoric heart of America. As an American classic, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* stands as a monument in Hunter Thompson’s bibliography and a shining beacon for the hippie era.

Gonzo Journalism has often been identified with this kind of drug-fueled narrative, but despite the Gonzo tag that has been put on this book, Thompson personally dismissed it as a piece of Gonzo Journalism in the “Jacket Copy for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*”. “... so I should cut back and explain, at this point, that *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is a *failed experiment in Gonzo Journalism*” (Thompson: 1979d: 114). “...In the end I found myself

imposing an essentially fictional framework on what began as a piece of straight/crazy journalism” (Thompson: 1979d: 114). The main failure in terms of Gonzo journalism in this case, is the lack of correspondence with the Gonzo intent. The line between what is fiction and what is reality is no longer blurred, as the story contains more of Thompson’s imagination, than what actually happened during that eventful weekend in Las Vegas. Originally the story sets off as a piece of Gonzo Journalism, and like in “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” the story *is* in fact based on two real events, the Mint 400 and a national drug convention, and a genuine trip that the two friends made to Las Vegas. There is also a change in content of the story resulting in a personal statement about a state of the American Dream in the American society. However, as the story progressed it spun out of its starting point in reality, and passed the border into fiction. Some of the scenes are simply too crazy and exaggerated, and as Thompson said it himself: “Only a goddamn lunatic would write a thing like this and then claim it was true” (Thompson: 1979d: 116). One incident like this is when Duke insists on filling the tires of the car with several times the recommended air pressure. “The two front ones were tighter than snare drums; they felt like teak wood when I tapped them with the rod” (Thompson: 2005: 154). In a Gonzo article these incidents would be labelled imaginary digressions, but in this case Thompson claims them to be true. “Because my story *was* true. I was certain of that. And it was extremely important, I felt, for the *meaning* of our journey to be made absolutely clear” (Thompson: 2005: 8).

The element of personal involvement is without a doubt present here. Unfortunately in this case it does not serve as an aid to reach some higher level of understanding. As mentioned above, there is a change in content in terms of both real events, but there is no attempt of finding a story behind the story that can be connected to them. There is no blending into the milieu, as the two characters are so strong personalities that it is impossible for them to conform. Separately

they would stand out in any group of people, and together they form a lethal binary opposition that becomes too strong and powerful for the story to handle. They stand out in a crowd, and they don't care. Together and separately they function as explosive catalysts to the story. The reason for the lack of these elements is probably because most of it was made up and as have been mentioned above; it was essentially a fictional framework on a piece of crazy journalism.

For the story to have been a piece of Gonzo Journalism, in a hypothetical and contra-factual situation, the motorcycle race would have had to involve for instance the scag baron Savage Henry, whom Dr Gonzo refers to in the scene with the hitch-hiker in the first couple of chapters of the book, in some way that could denote a trend or symptom of the decadent state of the American society. The other actual event that is referred to in part two of the book is the drug convention, which illustrates Thompson's liking of satire. By having the two "drug-addled fraud-fugitive who just ripped off a downtown hotel" mingled into a gathering of 1500 high-ranking cops from all over the country to discuss the "Drug Problem", the scene is set for Thompson to display his skills at satire (Thompson: 2005: 80). However, like in the case of the motorcycle race, there is no connection between the actual convention and the "more important" story behind the story other than it illustrates just how out of touch the law enforcers are with the problem they are discussing. "'What the fuck are these people talking about?' my attorney whispered. 'You'd have to be crazy on acid to think a joint looked like a goddamn cockroach!'" (Thompson: 2005: 138). The story is more directed to the crazy Gonzo adventures of Raoul Duke, than it is a story made by the gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson. The anecdotes about the two brothers-in-drugs' indulgences on various locations in Las Vegas are told in a very neurotic, paranoid and consequently amusing manner, but they do not connect very well to either the Mint 400 race, or the drug convention.

While the story fails to meet the Gonzo intent, it is nonetheless a very important Gonzo document in that it complies with Thompson's journalistic method in terms of language and style. A more precise label on this piece would be Gonzo fiction, as *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* stands out as an extreme story compared to the rest of his bibliography. However, given the popularity of the book, there would be an increasing number of these narratives containing references to the use of drugs. The importance of the tape recorder for instance is crucial as a device for capturing live moment scenes and dialogues for the story. "We'll need some decent equipment and plenty of cash on the line – if only for drugs and a super-sensitive tape recorder, for the sake of a permanent record" (Thompson: 2005: 9). Another use of the tape recorder is seen in the bathtub scene where it becomes an instrument of its own. In an attempt to commit suicide in the midst of an acid high, Dr Gonzo insists on Duke to throw the tape recorder into the bathtub when at the peak of the song "White Rabbit" by Jefferson Airplane. Duke as the rational thinker of the two in this situation, obviously refuses. "'Shit, they'd make me explain it – drag me down to some rotten coroner's inquest and grill me about ... yes ... the *exact* details.. I don't need that'" (Thompson: 2005: 60). What makes the use of the tape recorder a Gonzo element is the *way* the tape recorder was used. Almost all reporters use a tape recorder when investigating a case or interviewing people. Thompson, however, would employ these interviews and mental notes-to-self directly into the texts, and, thus, restoring a sense of authenticity of the situation in the later edited text.

From page 161-168 there is also a big bulk of transcribed parts of one of the tape recordings Thompson made during the trip, although some parts of it apparently was inaudible according to the editor's note. However, it captured a live conversation between Duke and Dr Gonzo while they were questioning a truck stop employee about the American Dream. This episode becomes rather amusing when it turns out that the two main characters are talking about

the concept of the American Dream whereas Lou, the truck stop employee, mistakes it for a physical place. Being another break in genre, the use of the tape recorder also amplifies and supports the argument that Thompson uses it as a concrete device in his narration and not just a tool.

Another aspect that might have contributed into making it easier for Thompson to take this leap from reality into fiction was the fact that he was telling the story through a fictional character and narrative voice, which might even have been one of Thompson's alter egos. Raoul Duke had been a character of Thompson's previously and is mentioned already in *Hell's Angels*. In terms of journalism Duke was equipped with a ferocious fearlessness, and contrary to other journalists he sought subjectivity rather than objectivity for inspiration to the outcome and potential birth of a story. "Objective Journalism is a hard thing to come by these days. We all yearn for it, but who can point the way? The only man who comes to mind, right offhand, is my good friend and colleague on the sports desk, Raoul Duke. Most journalists only *talk* about objectivity, but Dr Duke grabs it straight by the fucking throat. You will be hard pressed to find any argument, among professionals, on the question of Dr Duke's objectivity" (Thompson: 2006: 33). As Ralph Steadman comments on Thompson in the documentary *Buy the Ticket, Take the Ride*: "There was no story until he got involved in it" (Black & Thurman: 2006).

However, when looking at the story from the character's point of view, Duke as a fictional character does indeed embark on a journey fueled by "pure Gonzo Journalism". "It was going to be a quite different thing from the Mint 400. That had been an *observer* gig, but this one would need *participation* . . ." (Thompson: 2005: 109). Accompanied by his sidekick Dr Gonzo, Duke is driven by a call to find the American Dream in Las Vegas, although their journey would be quite extraordinary. With a total disregard for any law, authority or social norms the two men make

their way through the weekend loading up on “every drug known to civilized man since 1544 A.D” (Thompson: 2005: 188). The references to drugs in this book are numerous and extensive, as the two main characters had an affinity for controlled substances. “... but once you get locked in a serious drug collection, the tendency is to push it as far as you can” (Thompson: 2005: 4). But to what extent does the drug-taking affect the story of the book? Initially the story starts off on a frenzied, mind-boggling note accompanied by grim hallucinations about huge bats and manta-rays sweeping and swooping over the huge red Chevy convertible. At first the paranoid observations of Duke strike the reader as amusing, because it is evident that that these images exist only in the mind of Duke’s LSD-driven imagination. As the drugs turn more and more unconventional, the mood of the story changes accordingly from a chipper and humorous tone in the first part of the story, to a progressively dark feel towards the end. “Ether is the perfect drug for Las Vegas. In this town they love a drunk. Fresh Meat. So they put us through the turn-stiles and turned us loose inside” (Thompson: 2005: 46).

Compared to Ralph Steadman in “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” Dr Gonzo is more of a binary opposition than one of Thompson’s aids to cover the story. In the beginning of the story Dr Gonzo is the one who takes care of all the practical parts like making reservations for hotels and renting cars, whereas Duke is there simply to “*cover the story*” (Thompson: 2005: 12). However, both of them get so wired up on drugs that it may seem like they had a shared emotional account at least when it comes to paranoia. As the story progresses, Dr Gonzo becomes the more active part in terms of the more obscene and questionable scenes of the book, despite his position as a legal liaison. Dr Gonzo is responsible for the attempted suicide by electrocution in the bathtub scene, the encounter with the underage Lucy, the threatening scene with the waitress, as well as the main contributor to vomit scenes. The fate of Acosta is still to this day inconclusive, but all signs of him disappeared in 1974. In the movie adaptation of

*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* director Terry Gilliam has included a quote based on Thompson's obituary of Acosta. "[...] one of God's own prototypes - a high-powered mutant of some kind who was never even considered for mass production. He was too weird to live and too rare to die" (Acosta: 1973: 7). Towards the end of the book Thompson makes the following conclusion as to why none of them gets arrested during that weekend: "The only hope now, I felt, was the possibility that we'd done to such excess, with our gig, that nobody in a position to bring the hammer down on us could possibly *believe* it" (Thompson: 2005: 173).

The conflict between Duke and Thompson was one of the problems Thompson was faced with by using a pseudonym. The line between his own persona and Duke's became blurred, and he admitted frustration over the fact that at times he did not know if people were talking to Thompson or Duke. There are obviously some parts of Thompson in Duke when it comes to experiences with drugs- and gun-related issues, and there are references to Thompson in the book. "I shrugged. "That's not me," I said. "That's a guy named Thompson. He works for Rolling Stone . . . a vicious, crazy kind of person" (Thompson: 2005. 195). In an interview from 1975 about him personally and Gonzo Journalism, he expressed a bit of ambivalence as to this mix up (Gilliam: 2003). At the same time it raised the popularity and myth-like status of him and his writing, but consequently people wanted to see more of Duke and the crazy weirdness than they wanted to see Thompson. Over the years Thompson would eventually become more Duke and less himself, but then again he had at one point or another consumed and experimented with "every type of drug known to civilized man since 1544 A.D." (Thompson: 2005: 188).

Another issue Thompson disapproved of very strongly was the comic strip called *Doonesbury* by Gerry Trudeau. One of the main characters of that comic strip is character named Uncle Duke who looks conspicuously like Thompson. The character is portrayed as a right-wing, conservative, gun-totting, trigger-happy journalist with, according to recent updates supported the

administration of African dictators. In other words, Thompson's objections and anger to these issues were not unsubstantiated. Another aspect to this was that he genuinely wanted to become a respected and well-renowned writer comparable to his author idols of Faulkner, Fitzgerald and Hemmingway. With these wilder and untruthful sides attached to his already reputation of weirdness, which the fans loved for their outlandishness, Thompson feared that his literary ambitions would be crushed on account of his allegedly buffoon-like reputation.

As in *Hell's Angels* the reference to Horatio Alger is used as an instrument of satire, as his novels from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century would romanticize rags-to-riches stories typically involving young adolescent boys who would make it through hard work. Thompson uses his name to demonstrate that the old values and ideals had disappeared and replaced by a generation of money grabbers. When referring to the corrupt owner of the Circus-Circus, Thompson comments: "Absolutely," I said. "It's pure Horatio Alger, all the way down to his attitude" (Thompson: 2005: 191). "But what *was* the story? Nobody had bothered to say- So we would have to drum it up on our own. Free Enterprise. The American Dream. Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs in Las Vegas. Do it *now*: pure Gonzo journalism" (Thompson: 2005: 12). What these stories again lead up to is the big bad wolf so to speak in Thompson's opinion, who was Richard Nixon. Upon commenting on the death of Nixon, Thompson made the following comment: "If the right kind of people had been in charge of Nixon's funeral, his casket would have been launched into one of those open-sewage canals that empty into the ocean just south of Los Angeles" (Thompson: 1995: 241). What aggravated Thompson the most about him was how he was first and foremost out of touch with the rest of society, and how he used his position as president not in a way to provide for the well-being of the population of the country, but rather create opportunities for the new rising generation of capitalists. "Nixon was no more a Saint than



he was a Great President. He was more like Sammy Glick than Winston Churchill” (Thompson: 1995: 243). In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* Nixon has a more general point of reference as a negative icon, but anybody who has read any of Thompson’s articles previously and read interviews with him, knew of his sentiments towards of Nixon. “. . . and it’s worth nothing, historically, that downers came in with Nixon” (Thompson: 2005: 202). Despite this fact Nixon would be the one who would prevail, which proved in reality that the wrong people were obtaining the American Dream for the wrong reasons and by the wrong means. The Watergate scandal must have been the nail in the coffin for Thompson’s anger towards Nixon, but then again he was later pardoned by Gerald Ford, who according to Thompson, told several golf partners that: “I know I’ll go to hell, because I pardoned Richard Nixon” (Thompson: 1995: 239).

In both “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* there are examples of people taking short cuts in order to obtain the American Dream. “. . . – still screaming around these desert-city crap tables at four-thirty on a Sunday morning. Still humping the American Dream, that vision of the Big Winner somehow emerging from the last-minute pre-dawn chaos of a stale Vegas casino” (Thompson: 2005: 57). In “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” the symbol of this trend is denoted to the owner of the winning horse, who gained a huge amount of money on a small investment. In this story, however, there are numerous examples of people hoping to achieve the American Dream by cheating their way to the finish line, and even more examples of people who will never succeed because of the organisation of the system and the people enforcing it. One example of this last group of people is the hitchhiker whom Duke and Dr Gonzo encounter in the middle of the desert on their way to Las Vegas. Finally an honest soul that deserves to succeed one might think, carrying all hopes and dreams in a backpack who exclaims with a big grin on his face as the two stop to give him a lift: “Hot

damn! I never rode in a convertible before!” (Thompson: 2005: 5). What he meets is a nasty face-to-face with reality, as menacing vibrations of the two escalate. Our two anti-heroes are also embarking on their own personal journey into the American Dream, but by totally different approach and final result. By means of stolen credit cards and simply bailing gigantic hotel bills, the two aim to go the distance for as long as their bodies are capable of doing so, and as long as the long arm of the law will not catch up with their fiendish plan. “I tell you man, this is the American Dream in action! We’d be fools not to ride this strange torpedo all the way out to the end” (Thompson: 2005: 11). “It was a gross, physical salute to the fantastic possibilities of life in this country – but only for those with true grit. And we were chock full of that” (Thompson: 2005: 18). One of the many low points in searching for the state of the American Dream is when the two characters discover that the old American Dream is found in a discotheque called the *Old Psychiatrist’s Club*, which used to be hangout for drug dealers and users according to a truck stop employee (Thompson: 2005: 165). When they inspect the place more closely, they learn that it was abandoned, and according to a gas station employee the place had “*burned down about three years ago*” (Thompson: 2005: 168). As the story was written in 1971, this would be about the year 1968, which marked the highlight of the peace & love generation. It would also approximately mark the beginning of Richard Nixon’s first period in office, which it has previously been mentioned that Thompson held a grudge. However, the most influential incident that year, which would change Thompson's outset on American politics and social life, was the violence he was exposed to during a protest outside a building in Chicago where the Democrats were holding a convention. When trying to help a woman that had been brutalized by the police, Thompson himself would experience the impact of multiple clubs to his head. From that point on his interest in politics would escalate dramatically, which resulted in the epic coverage of the Democratic campaign trail in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign trail '72*. Another low point

for Duke's search for the American Dream is when he concludes twice that the central nerve of the American Dream is located at the Circus-Circus. In another scene he also makes another conclusion on the place: "The Circus-Circus is what the whole hep world would be doing if the Nazis had won the war. This is the Sixth Reich" (Thompson: 2005: 46). "You must realize," I said, "that we've found the main nerve." "I know", he said. "That's what gives me the Fear" (Thompson: 2005: 48). The satire and irony is presented in almost endless layers, and it exemplifies just how twisted and corrupted the American Dream has become in Thompson's view.

The ideal of the American Dream predicts hard work in return for success in whatever form this might be, as the meaning of success differs from person to person. For the two anti-heroes of this story Las Vegas represents the death of the American Dream where individuality and freedom is given up for the celebration of decadence, excess and easy money. In Las Vegas success can be obtained by the flip of a card or the roll of a dice without taking the detour through tedious and time-consuming good-old blood, sweat, tears and hard work. Las Vegas in itself functions as a metaphor, whereas it can on the one hand symbolise an oasis in the middle of a barren desert and a celebration of American ingenuity. On the other hand it also represents the centre of gambling and excess, which is the exact opposite of what the American Dream stands for. While the book speaks negatively of the current state of American society in general and the state of the American Dream, it is similarly a celebration of the innocent spirit of the 1960s, which was gradually and inevitably replaced by a corrupt and corporate mentality. "Joe Frasier, like Nixon, had finally prevailed for reasons that people like me refused to understand – at least out loud. . . . But that was some other era, burned out and long gone from the brutish realities of this foul year of our Lord 1971" (Thompson: 2005: 23). This passage in a way encapsulates a lot

of Thompson's writership, as what aggravated him the most was to see his country and all the fantastic possibilities it beheld go down the drain. Thompson was a romantic and a "patriot", and the watershed that had happened in the American society had had a deep impact on him. "So now less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look west, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost *see* the high-water mark – that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back" (Thompson: 2005: 68). The wave in this example is a metaphor for the new generation represented by Nixon and the corruptors of the American Dream that left no room for the peace and love generation's belief in the "fantastic sense that whatever we were doing was *right*, that we were winning...." (Thompson: 2005: 68). "Our energy would simply *prevail*" (Thompson: 2005: 68).

The spirit of the 1960s had lost its potency and innocence, and a new reality was catching up. "Ignore that nightmare in the bathroom. Just another ugly refugee from the Love Generation, some doom-struck who couldn't handle the pressure" (Thompson: 2005: 63). According to Thompson's widow Anita Thompson this passage was one of his favourites, and one he would frequently cite when asked to read out loud from his bibliography (Black & Thurman: 2006). Unlike in the book, the film adaptation of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* puts this scene at the end of the story, which perhaps is more fitting for this passage. Duke and Dr Gonzo's were two 1960S characters who went for a ride to 1970s Las Vegas. Out of touch and out of time, the city chewed them up and spit them out like the wave that had washed over the US from the west.

## Thompson's Gonzo Legacy

Behind the phenomenon of Gonzo Journalism was the drive and effort of a single individual; Hunter S. Thompson. In the wake of Thompson's success there would be many efforts to imitate his unique style, but no one could do it quite like the master. His motive for going Gonzo was to find some sort of a personal pressure valve to the injustice and wasted opportunities he saw happening to his beloved country. By using his own subjective experiences as well as autobiographical elements he created a scene where he could excel in terms of producing literary productions as well as get an outlet on the good qualities about the American way of life that he saw gradually were deteriorating. "I stopped and listened, standing in the shadows of an ancient warehouse and feeling like a man with no country at all" (Thompson: 1998a: 30). Through Faulkner's idea that the best fiction is far more true than the best journalism, Thompson's Gonzo Journalism would blur the line between truth and fiction as well as truthfulness of the information it was providing. Thompson's main objective nonetheless was to awake some kind of reaction in the reader. It is personal, unpredictable, outrageous and unpredictable, but at the same time roarily funny. Still it is also in many people's views, the closest thing to the truth despite how twisted and weird it was. Through Gonzo, Hunter S. Thompson created a literary grey area which broke with conventions of both standard and New Journalism. In the articles discussed there are numerous references to other journalists and newspapers, and his way of writing may be seen as a rebellion against the established press by trotting his own path as a hyper-individualist journalist. As Steadman states in *Buy the Ticket, Take the Ride*, what it all came down to was first and foremost to be a channel of entertainment, but it would be even better his writing could make people think and reflect over the possibilities of the American Dream. In all three works discussed in this thesis there is a different perception and measurement of the level of success in

the different groups of people that inadvertently are involved in the texts. What is common for them in Thompson's view is that they are seeking the wrong kind of success on the wrong premises. Rather than going after old-fashioned values that involve hard-work and a sense of making a change through this effort, the people in Thompson's texts seek success in the form of power in order to maintain their agenda of terror and intimidation over people or simply fast and easy money. This leads to the idea of the deterioration and death of the American dream which can be seen as a prominent theme in all of the three works. For Thompson it would become a life long pursuit for him to unveil and expose everybody who would try to corrupt this ideal from former president Richard Nixon until the current George W. Bush.

Thompson as a person was as well known for his charisma as for his affection for the weird in life. It seems like everybody who had ever met him had a unique story to tell. In his writing the death of the American Dream is a central theme, but his own life would eventually turn out to be a realisation of that dream. He became an innovative writer, and could venture his opinions to a nationwide audience. In a 1975 BBC documentary he stated: "For good or ill, I can function here" (Gilliam: 2003). His suicide at age 67 marked the end of a prolonged life as he had suffered from medical ailments for several years after prolonged addictions to alcohol and other drugs. While living he was a cult hero and had achieved a larger-than-life status, and among his many fans he will be remembered as a spokesman for the hippie generation against corporate America.

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