When a Writer Disguises Oneself as A Journalist: Hunter S. Thompson and the Gonzo Journalism

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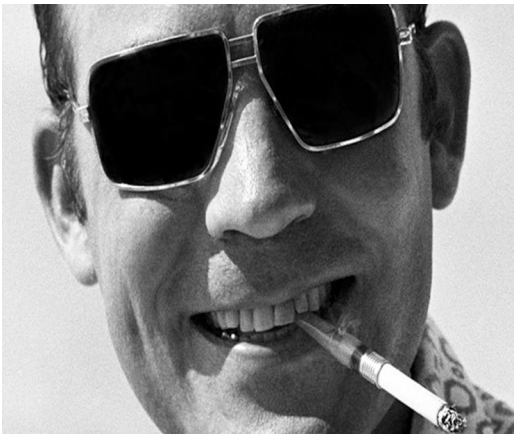
Abstract

Hunter Stockton Thompson was born on the 18th of July 1937 in Louisville, Kentucky, and he was the son of Jack Robert Thompson and Virginia Ray Davison[3]. Hunter showed an early interest in literature and journalism, collaborating with a newspaper called the *Southern Star*. He earned since his childhood a reputation as a maverick. In 1955, after several incidents of underage drinking, theft and vandalism, Hunter S. Thompson was sentenced to sixty days in jail for stealing a man's wallet and spent his high school graduation day behind bars. He was forced to choose between prison and military service, he decided to join the army and, while serving at Eglin Air Force Base, he went to night classes at the Florida State University and marked the actual beginning of his journalism career by taking the sports editor position on the weekly *Command Courier*, an Air Force newspaper.

Keywords: Hunter S. Thompson, gonzo journalism, narative writing

After his discharge, Thompson pursued a journalism career and had a series of jobs at a variety of small newspapers in Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico and New York, as well as a short stage as a copy boy at *Time* magazine, a period during which he received over and over again rejection notices for his literary works. He took a few literature classes at Columbia University and practiced the novelist's skills by meticulously copying Hemingway's and Fitzgerald's novels and short stories on his typewriter. Later on, in 1962, he became the South America correspondent for the recently created weekly *National Observer*, a periodical in which Hunter S. Thompson published stories



[3] The bio-bibliographical data are based on the information delivered by the American National Biography Online (http://www.anb.org/articles/16/16-03546.html) and http://www.biography.com/people/hunter-s-thompson-9506260

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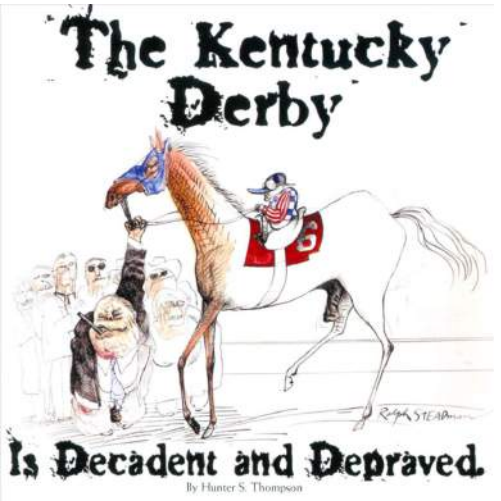
that proved he had already begun to develop a subjective and irreverent writing style that tended to blur the line between fiction and fact.

But the first real step towards creating a truly innovative literary-journalistic style took place in 1965, after leaving *National Observer*, marrying his longtime girlfriend Sandra Conklin and failing to write a proper novel. The turning point came when the *Nation* gave Thompson the assignment to write a feature about the infamous motorcycle gang Hell's Angels, a story that would be published on May the 17th 1965 and which contradicted the general point of view stating that the gang members were nothing but outcasts, losers and outsiders. The article was the starting point for the novel *Hell's Angels: A Strange and Terrible Saga* (1966), a book which was the result of almost a year spent among the Angels and in which Hunter S. Thompson seriously blurred the lines between reality and fantasy, a future trademark of his writing style. This "journalistic" novel rejected the long-standing conventions of impartial, even impersonal observation of the world and ended with a striking epilogue that described the writing saga as "fast and wild in some moments, slow and dirty in others, but on balance it looked like a bummer" (Thompson, 1999, p. 265).



But Thompson's first work to be referred to as "Gonzo" was the famous *The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved*, a story that challenged the traditional way of reporting and which was published in June 1970 in the rather obscure and short-lived publication called *Scanlan's Monthly*. This seminal article that kicked off the new journalism christened "Gonzo" consisted of anything but what Hunter S. Thompson was assigned to, namely reporting on a highly popular horse race held annually in Louisville, Kentucky, on the first Saturday in May, a race known in the United States as "The Most Exciting Two Minutes in Sports".

Facing an imminent deadline and with no actual story drafted yet, he had the bizarre idea to send disparate considerations on anything else but the race itself (which he actually didn't even see), depicting the hype, celebration and depravity that surrounded the event. The resulting article (later reprinted in Thompson's Gonzo anthology *The Great Shark Hunt Gonzo, Papers, Vol. 1, Strange Tales from a Strange Time*), with only three sentences describing the results of the race itself, was a compilation of thoughts about the debased atmosphere at the Kentucky Derby accompanied by the suggestive sketches of Thompson's lifelong collaborator, British cartoonist Ralph Steadman. That was

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the start of a brilliant partnership that would produce plenty of iconoclastic works, including Steadman's visceral illustrations for Hunter S. Thompson's masterpiece, *Fear And Loathing in Las Vegas*.

Later on, a few years after Thompson's death, Ralph Steadman remarkably summarized their artistic relation and therewith the essence of "Gonzo" philosophy: "You become the story. That's what Hunter always liked the idea of best. Don't stand back and do it like an official bank clerk filling in a form. You're actually creating the story as you go. There is no story, until you start one. That's how we did it. That's why it always was fun"[4]. And that is exactly what they would do: becoming part of the story or, to be more accurate, the story itself: "The next day was heavy. With only thirty hours until post time I had no press credentials and –according to the sports editor of the Louisville Courier-Journal – no hope at all of getting any. Worse, I needed two sets: one for myself and another for Ralph Steadman, the English illustrator who was coming from London to do some Derby drawings. All I knew about him was that this was his first visit to the United States. And the more I pondered the fact, the more it gave me fear. How would he bear up under the heinous culture shock of being lifted out of London and plunged into the drunken mob scene at the Kentucky Derby? There was no way of knowing. Hopefully, he would arrive at least a day or so ahead, and give himself time to get acclimated. Maybe a few hours of peaceful sightseeing in the Bluegrass country around Lexington. My plan was to pick him up at the airport in the huge Pontiac Ballbuster I'd rented from a used-car salesman name Colonel Quick, then whisk him off to some peaceful setting that might remind him of England"[5].

This is more literature than journalism as we know it, isn't it? But we shouldn't be shocked of this whatsoever. After all, sometimes, if not often, there is, may be or might be an interconnection between literature and journalism. We can frequently notice that there exists a thin line between these two fascinating means of communication, two delightful forms of expression. We can invoke, of course, in order to prove our point, the cultural journalism and that special genre called feature which is significantly literaturized. But we won't. Firstly, we will only stress that both of them, literature and journalism, spread around a certain amount of information. We should not forget that probably the most reliable accounts of the Battle of Borodino between Napoleon and Kutuzov is provided by no one else but the great Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy. Secondly, both literature and journalism transmit opinions and ideas, not to mention emotions. And these common inner elements made

[4] *"Drawing became a weapon" - Ralph Steadman on his Gonzo life with Hunter S Thompson*, an interview by Kevin Perry for GQ Magazine UK, http://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/entertainment/articles/2013-03/04/ralph-steadman-documentary-interview

[5]http://www.openculture.com, *Read 11 Free Articles by Hunter S. Thompson That Span His Gonzo Journalist Career (1965-2005)*, http://english138.web.unc.edu/files/2011/08/The-Kentucky-Derby-is-Decadent-and-Depraved.pdf, p.5

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William Faulkner say, in a rather exaggerated statement, that the message revealed by the literary works is more "real" than that supplied by any type of journalism that claims to be as objective as can be.

Hunter S. Thompson does not necessarily agree with Faulkner's radical opinion on this matter, he doesn't think fiction offers some more "accurate" information than the journalistic products. He just believes that both of them, literature and journalism, are artificial categories as they represent nothing more than forms of expression, different means to reach a common goal. That is why he writes a column more like a writer than a journalist, disregarding the facts and overdrawing the emotions and the sensations induced by the events depicted. Thus Gonzo is a type of journalism which proposes a way of hyper-subjective writing that transforms the reporter into a character; it is a first person report that reflects the (self-)induced emotions of an author who often neglects the event itself, the actual information and uses them only as a pretext, a trigger for his narrative endeavour and his introspective exercise.

The Gonzo journalism tends to favor style over accuracy by using personal experiences and emotions to describe to a certain extent an event and by disregarding the sober and refined style used by most of the journalists. The Gonzo journalists abundantly use intertextuality, metatextuality, humour, sarcasm and obviously exaggeration.

Christine Othitis emphasizes what she considers to be the seven main characteristics of a Gonzo work:

- overlapping themes of sex, violence, drugs, sports and politics;
- use of quotes by famous people and other writers or sometimes his own as an epigraph;
- references to public figures such as newspeople, actors, musicians and politicians;
- a tendency to move away from the topic subject or subject he started out with;
- use of sarcasm and/or vulgarity as humour;
- tendency for the words to flow and an extremely creative use of English;
- extreme scrutiny of situations.[6]

From the literary point of view, Hunter S. Thompson follows in the footsteps of his iconoclastic predecessors from the 1950's, the representatives of the *Beat Generation*, the so-called *Beatniks*. Thompson shows the same insolence, daring, anguish and irreverence as William S. Burroughs, Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, and, from the (pseudo-)journalistic point of view, he stands alongside his more or less congeners who were part of what was called the *New Journalism*, Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Joan

[6] Othitis, Christine, *The Beginnings and Concept of Gonzo Journalism*, 1994, revised March 1997, http://www.gonzo.org/articles/lit/esstwo.html

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Didion, Terry Southern, Robert Thomas Christgau, Gay Talese and so on. Just like the beatniks before him, Thompson experiments both artistically and existentially by writing with a psychedelic frenzy under the influence of drugs. Therefore we consider to be entitled to consider him the last major literary representative of the American "Drug Decade", a genuine product of a counterculture that supplied an alternative to the traditional establishment through promoting liberal, sometimes libertine ideas. Out of this counterculture different movements emerged, like rock, pop, hippie, psychedelic etc., and this is to be noticed in literature, visual arts and music. These cultural explosions and implosions led to a structural reconfiguration of the American society and many other Western traditional societies.

When there is a convention assumed by both parties, the author and the public, the writer disguised as journalist cannot be accused of deceit. Hunter S. Thompson is not a manipulator, a charlatan, a swindler, because his readers are aware of the journalistic/literary convention he proposes and never breaks. The journalist and writer George Ames Plimpton states that Hunter's tendency to move away from one topic to another is nothing but an attempt to write about what he feels his readers want to read. Plimpton says that Thompson is a "persona writer, and that's very rare," (Carroll, 1993, p.147). And Christine Othitis can't agree more: "This statement is very true, as Thompson has an amazing ability to capture personality and feeling. <People> really is what he writes about the best; when you get past all the clutter in his writing (the guns, drugs, etc.) one finds that he has written mostly about people's behavior". And the example is more than relevant: "*The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved* is not really about the horse race. In fact, the actual race makes up about 1% of the article (the winner of the race is never mentioned either). The story is devoted to Thompson's encounter with a buffoon in a bar, hill people in Kentucky, meeting the cartoonist Ralph Steadman, and taking Ralph to dinner with his brother and his wife"[7].

The tongue-in-cheek writing of Hunter S. Thompson is the writer's main quality in P.J. O'Rourke's opinion: "Two things separate Hunter Thompson from the common herd of modern-lit angst peddlers. First, Thompson is a better writer... Second, Thompson makes us laugh. This is something we're unlikely to do during performances of... *Waiting for Godot*, even if we're as high as Raoul Duke. Hunter Thompson takes the darkest questions of ontology, the grimmest epistemological queries, and by his manner of posing them, sends us doubled over in fits of risibility, our sides aching from armpit to pelvic girdle, the tops of our legs raw from knee-slapping, beer spitting out of our noses. We laugh so hard that at any given moment, we're almost as likely to vomit as the 300-pound Samoan attorney" (O'Rourke, 1996, p.66). And a suggestive example in this respect is to be found also in *The*

[7] Ibidem.

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Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved, a fragment that reveals Thompson's concerns after meeting his English companion: "He had done a few good sketches, but so far we hadn't seen that special kind of face that I felt we would need for a lead drawing. It was a face I'd seen a thousand times at every Derby I'd ever been to. I saw it, in my head, as the mask of the whiskey gentry – a pretentious mix of booze, failed dreams and a terminal identity crisis; the inevitable result of too much inbreeding in a closed and ignorant culture. One of the key genetic rules in breeding dogs, horses or any other kind of thoroughbred is that close inbreeding tends to magnify the weak points in a bloodline as well as the strong points. In horse breeding, for instance, there is a definite risk in breeding two fast horses who are both a little crazy. The offspring will likely be very fast and also very crazy. So the trick in breeding thoroughbreds is to retain the good traits and filter out the bad. 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. ("Goddam, did you hear about Smitty's daughter? She went crazy in Boston last week and married a nigger!"). 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"[8].

The literary critic Jerome Klinkowitz tries to identify the essence of the Gonzo way of reporting by comparing Thompson to Kurt Vonnegut: "The quick cut, the strategic use of digression, the ability to propel himself through a narrative like a stunt driver, steering with the skids so that the most improbable intentions result in the smoothest maneuvers, the attitude of having one's personal craziness pale before contemporary American life - on all these count Thompson and Vonnegut share an affinity" (Carroll, p.302). And Tim Cahill, a Gonzo descendant, identifies a kind of Peter Pan-like escapism in Hunter S. Thompson's life and work: "Hunter represents freedom. He has confidence, plus size, plus a certain undeniable fearlessness. We all have a kind of Peter Pan ideal in our lives when we're about twelve. We're going to do this, we're going to do that, and it gets beaten out of us. It gets beaten out of us sometime between puberty and our first job. People often regret the things they didn't do. Hunter is the alter ego who got to do *everything*" (Carroll, 1993, p.278).

After creating this innovative style called Gonzo with *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved*, Thompson radicalizes his view on contemporary society and comes to the conclusion that the American Dream is fatally ill and doomed to fade out rapidly. The result is his most critically

[8] http://www.openculture.com, *Read 11 Free Articles by Hunter S. Thompson That Span His Gonzo Journalist Career (1965-2005)*, http://english138.web.unc.edu/files/2011/08/The-Kentucky-Derby-is-Decadent-and-Depraved.pdf, pp. 10-11

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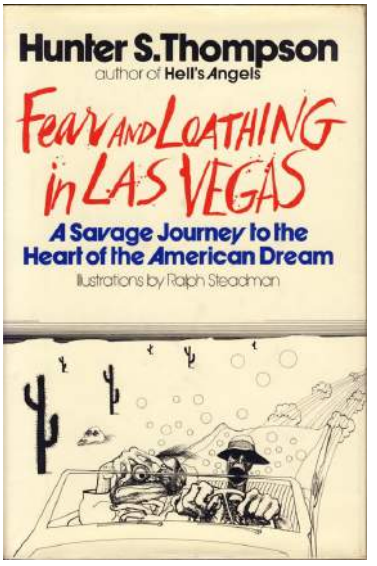
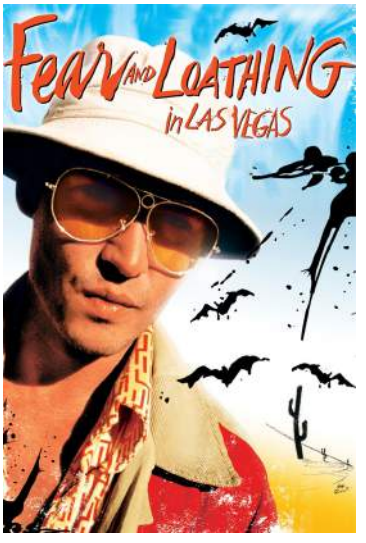
acclaimed and commercially successful book *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1971), a psychedelic depiction of the happenings surrounding another sports event, a hallucinogenic, manic and frantic first-person story of the trip to Las Vegas of the cynical Raoul Duke (author's alter ego) and his companion, Dr. Gonzo.



From the very start we can find a clear sample of Gonzo style: "We were somewhere around Barstow on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold. I remember saying something like <I feel a bit lightheaded; maybe you should drive...>. And suddenly there was a terrible roar all around us and the sky was full of what looked like huge bats, all swooping and screeching and diving around the car, which was going about a hundred miles an hour with the top down to Las Vegas. And a voice was screaming: <Holy Jesus! What are these goddamn animals?>. Then it was quiet again. My attorney had taken his shirt off and was pouring beer on his chest, to facilitate the tanning process. <What the hell are you yelling about?> he muttered, staring up at the sun with his eyes closed and covered with wrap-around Spanish sunglasses. <Never mind>, I said. <It's your turn to drive>. I hit the brakes and aimed the Great Red Shark toward the shoulder of the highway. No point mentioning those bats, I thought. The poor bastard will see them soon enough" (Thompson, 1989, p. 3). The iconic novel was first published in serial form in the Rolling Stone magazine and it was soon followed by *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* (1973), a sardonic burst on politics and politicians.



Afterwards Hunter S. Thompson's career was marred by several incidents and fiascos caused mainly by his abuse of alcohol and drugs. When he was sent to Zaire in 1974, along with his loyal collaborator Ralph Steadman, to cover the famous "Rumble in the Jungle" boxing fight between George Foreman and Muhammad Ali, Thompson missed the actual fight and spent most of the time in and by the hotel pool, heavily drinking and taking drugs. Then a report on abandonment of Saigon by the American troops turned out to be a flop and he started to contribute less and less to Rolling Stone magazine. He then collaborated with many other publications and gathered all

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his Gonzo works in the collections *The Great Shark Hunt: Strange Tales from a Strange Time; The Gonzo Papers Vol. 1*, *Generation of Swine: Tales of Shame and Degradation in the Eighties; The Gonzo Papers, Vol. 2*, *Songs of the Doomed: More Notes on the Death of the American Dream; The Gonzo Papers, Vol. 3* and *Better Than Sex: Confessions of a Political Junkie; The Gonzo Papers, Vol. 4*. Although he would never be able to meet the literary standards of yore, he became more and more famous, a celebrity which was enhanced when portrayed by Johnny Depp in Terry Gilliam's movie *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998).

Drained of inspiration, Hunter S. Thompson earned a comfortable living by participating to TV shows, giving interviews for newspapers and magazines and receiving royalties from his previous books and screen adaptations. After divorcing Sandra Conklin in 1980, Thompson married his longtime assistant, Anita Beymunk, in 2003. He lived his late years with his second wife at Owl Farm, where he decided to take his life by a self-inflicted gunshot on February the 20th 2005. Recently the Gonzo enthusiasts saluted Hunter S. Thompson's widow idea of turning Owl Farm into a permanent museum dedicated to the iconoclastic writer.

Hunter S. Thompson's major legacy is definitely the establishment of the new literary/journalistic paradigm known as Gonzo. He influenced plenty of writers and journalists who adhered to this new way of reflecting the reality by filtering the information through the sieve of personal emotions and feelings. Through mere extrapolation, the term Gonzo refers now to almost every form of independent and maverick journalism.

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