

The Gonzo Text – The Literary Journalism of Hunter Thompson

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Abstract

More has been written about the life of Hunter S Thompson than about the writing which brought him fame, although the peculiar nature of his first-person literary journalism makes his life and his work impossible to separate. Although the legend of the outlaw journalist is an indispensable feature, the focus of this textually-oriented study is Thompson's method, conventionally called 'Gonzo journalism', and how it operates. Drawing on theories of subjectivity and authorship informed by the work of Derrida, Foucault, Barthes and John Mowitt, I attempt to analyse the Gonzo Text, examining the place of various elements of 'Gonzo' style and content. Looking at key themes in Thompson's oeuvre - principally the problematics around representing drug experiences and the subjective experience of edgework, the nature of myths of objective and professional journalism in the context of political reportage, the interrogation of the place of sports in American culture and ideology, and, ultimately, Thompson's engagement with 'the death of the American Dream' – I examine the ways in which the Gonzo Text is constructed. The Text of Gonzo is placed in social, political and historical contexts in terms of both wider American history of the period, and the traditions of American journalism. Gonzo works can be read in terms of Thompson's renegotiation of the boundaries of reportable experience, of journalism, and even of personal safety and legal liability, with the unusual place of the voice of the author within Gonzo facilitating a unique type of hybrid Text. Blending fact and fiction into undecidability allows the Text to operate in some senses as what Derrida termed a 'pharmakon' – a site and agent of the instabilities of categories which cannot hold it. Gonzo journalism destabilises conventional ideas of literary journalism, and of journalism itself, in its peculiarly unclassifiable nature.

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Introduction - Disentangling the Gonzo Text

What were we doing out here? What was the meaning of this trip? Did I actually have a big red convertible out there on the street? Was I just roaming around these Mint Hotel escalators in a drug frenzy of some kind, or had I really come out here to Las Vegas to work on a *story*?¹ (Thompson, 2005a: 56)

A lot has been written about Hunter S. Thompson. As a journalist, he rose to national prominence with his exposé of the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang (Thompson, 1967) and cemented his reputation with the pioneering of 'Gonzo' journalism, his own exuberantly drug-addled, subversive, subjective method of writing the story – whether running wild in Las Vegas (Thompson, 2005a) or following McGovern or Nixon on the campaign trail (Thompson, 1983). His subjective, first-person, literary journalism includes elements of autobiography, and he also published autobiographical works such as *Kingdom of Fear* (Thompson, 2003) as well as volumes of his letters such as *The Proud Highway* (Thompson, 1997) and *Fear and Loathing in America* (Thompson, 2006). Much has also been written by others about the life of this journalist, author and activist, whose lifestyle and legendary exploits are inextricably entangled with the writings, Gonzo and otherwise, for which Thompson became famous. Ralph Steadman, Thompson's long-time illustrator and partner-in-crime, wrote a memoir of their collaboration (Steadman, 2006), and Thompson's Aspen-based friends and neighbours Michael Cleverly and Bob Braudis wrote a collection of *Untold Stories of Hunter S. Thompson* (Cleverly and Braudis, 2008). Thompson, literary figure but also celebrity poster-boy for drugs, guns, and a wildly excessive interpretation of rugged individualism, lived a very examined life.

In addition to biographical works such as these, and others such as E. Jean Carroll's *Hunter* (Carroll, 1993), McKeen's *Outlaw Journalist* (McKeen, 2008) and the

¹ The italics are from the original source material. I have made no such typographical changes to any of the quotations I use in this thesis.

exhaustive *Gonzo* (Wenner and Seymour: 2007), which was an oral biography assembled from interviews with scores of Thompson's friends and associates, Thompson the cultural icon and quasi-fictional character has shown up and continues to show up in all sorts of unlikely places in American culture. From *Doonesbury* (see Von Hoffman, 2010) and *The Simpsons* (Viva Ned Flanders, 1999) to films such as the fictionalised *Where the Buffalo Roam* (1980) or the theatrically distributed feature-length documentary *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson* (2009), and even a biography in the form of a graphic novel (Bingley and Hope-Smith, 2010), Thompson gets around as a cultural figure².

The fact of Thompson's prominence is interesting, as a kind of celebrity outlaw journalist, famed for guns, outrageousness, ultra-activist politics and, perhaps most prominently, legendary alcohol and substance abuse. Arguably just as interesting, however, is that Thompson's writing, though he was a writer by profession, is seldom the primary focus of all this attention. As Nuttall has noted in assessing continued interest in Thompson's lifestyle, the King of Gonzo's writing is worthy of study without reference to his counter-cultural exploits (were the two separable):

Although almost as much has been written about him as by him, no writer can remain alive solely through his biographers. There must be something in the work, the oeuvre, which demands posterity's attention. In Thompson's case it is the way he transformed not only political writing, allowing the private to invade the public, but also the very way we think about a journalist's role as producer of the first draft of history. (Nuttall, 2012: 113)

I should make clear that I am in no sense trying to plant a flag and claim first dibs on analysing Hunter Thompson's contributions to literature. Many of the examples I refer to above discuss the nature of Thompson's writing, and other works have examined his

² While considering Thompson's portrayal(s) in film is not a primary focus of this thesis, see for example McNair (2012) for a discussion of Thompson's recent cinematic prominence, with particular reference to Johnny Depp's work on *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998), *Gonzo* (2009) and *The Rum Diary* (2011).

work in depth (see for example, Stephenson, 2012) and with particular reference to the history of what came to be called The New Journalism (see for example, Weingarten, 2005). It is, however, interesting that the life of the outlaw journalist tends to get more ink than the actual journalism.

As Alan Rinzler puts the question, in his foreword to Hunter's 'graphic biography':

Why isn't Hunter S. Thompson taken more seriously? As his editor and literary goad for 35 years over four of his best books, I'm sorry to see that the public spectacle of Hunter as the King of Gonzo – a brain-addled, angry, deeply depressed, self-destructive lout – has prevailed in the popular consciousness while the real story of this ground-breaking prose artist and investigative journalist has all but disappeared. (Rinzler, 2010: v)

While I think this assessment may overstate, at least a little, the extent to which Thompson's work is obscured by his legend, it does seem clear that that legend has a prominent cultural life, worthy of consideration in studying the writings in which, let us not forget, the legend originated. The public persona of Hunter S Thompson as (in)famous Gonzo journalist was principally constructed, after all, within and by Thompson's works. That being said, the primary object of study of this work is 'Gonzo journalism', with reference to the figure of Hunter Thompson, and not the other way around³.

The figure of Thompson, and the ways in which Gonzo journalism makes reference to it, remain a part of Gonzo, and one which must be dealt with in classifying and interpreting the Gonzo Text. The books he produced include works that are (relatively) uncomplicatedly 'Gonzo Journalism', such as *Fear & Loathing In Las Vegas* (Thompson, 2005a), but also other books of non-fiction, as well as a novel (Thompson,

³ See Mosser (2012) for an in-depth overview both of the etymology of using 'Gonzo' in this sense, and of conventional approaches to its application as a term of literary classification. See also Tamony (1983) for an examination of how the term, once it was popularised by Thompson, came to be used in different ways in other popular culture of the period.

1998), which fairly straightforwardly aren't a part of this category. Since Gonzo isn't a sharply-defined category or a clear label affixed to some works and denied to others, arguing over what does and doesn't belong 'in' the Gonzo Text seems a fairly pointless exercise, but it is very interesting to note precisely this flexibility. I should make clear that throughout this discussion, the capitalisation of 'Text' signifies that the word is being used to refer to a cultural object being considered in terms of its possible meanings and cultural relevance(s), as opposed to text such as the text of a document, which signifies a piece of written language. This is what I mean when I speak of the Gonzo Text – at it's simplest, the Text comprised of the many texts (as in 'works', 'pieces' or 'articles') of Gonzo journalism.

'Gonzo' is hard to pin down, yet it remains a powerful cultural signifier. The purpose of this examination of the 'Gonzo' literary journalism of Hunter Thompson is to attempt the fullest possible theorisation of how this Gonzo Text can be read, with particular reference to its peculiar nature in terms of style, subjectivity, journalistic conventions and methodology, and its representations of prominent themes such as drug use and counter-cultures, ultra-activist and dissident politics, edgework, big-money sports, and even the so-called death of the American Dream. It is perhaps worth noting that drug use, as subjectively experienced first-hand by Thompson, rather than as a socio-political phenomenon to write about, is an exceptionally prominent feature of the Thompson legend/persona (which will be discussed at some length in Chapter One). It is a key theme of the type of construction of Thompson which allegedly obscures the writing, and for which Rinzler expressed such disgust.

In his foreword to Ralph Steadman's memoir, even fellow writer Kurt Vonnegut introduces the figure of Thompson as a friend, a Kentuckian, and a brilliant writer, but

also as a 'gun nut and drug abuser and heavy consumer of grain alcohol' before going on to address Thompson's drug use:

Until I myself read and then met Hunter, I would have thought it impossible for anyone whose brains were so saturated with mind-benders to make sense on a telephone, let alone write so well. (Vonnegut, 2006: xvii)

It is important not to get drawn into considering Thompson's work solely in terms of the substance abuse for which he was famous, but at the same time it is also important not to reject the relevance of that fame entirely, and throw out the written baby with the drugged bathwater. In Gonzo journalism, I would argue, it is important to let any approach to this Text – and there are many, many aspects and viewpoints worthy of consideration – take into account the peculiar nature of the figure of 'Hunter S. Thompson' (or even of 'Raoul Duke', Thompson's habitual pseudonym). It is also important, however, not to reduce this figure, the main character of the stories – the narrator, commentator and definitely-not-objective journalist who can be seen, in a sense, as being at the centre of the idea of Gonzo – to the single attribute of being 'on drugs'. There is more to the construction of the Gonzo journalist than that.

In attempting to analyse the Gonzo writings of Hunter S. Thompson, this figure of the writer, appearing within the Text, may be seen as presenting some difficulties which must be addressed. It is my contention, however, that 'Gonzo' journalism constructed, as a prominent characteristic which separated it from the rest of the 'New' journalism, essentially mythic systems – specifically and perhaps most importantly, the unique myth which Thompson cultivated around himself, through his presentation of his 'Gonzo' persona within his work, as the outlaw, outlandish, drug-fiend, criminal, subjective, 'Gonzo' journalist. I refer to this narrative persona as a myth because within the Text both it, and the specific nature of the writing for which it created a cultural space, could be read by his audience as, in a sense, naturalised.

What I mean by this is the kind of ‘naturalisation’ which Barthes defined as:

... the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature ... what causes mythical speech to be uttered is perfectly explicit, but it is immediately frozen into something natural; it is not read as a motive, but as a reason. (Barthes, 1973: 129)

That is part of Thompson’s achievement; the mythic sleight of hand that allows the reader to forget the self-awareness of his method. The stylistic excesses of Gonzo journalism, used to describe Thompson’s own experienced excesses, do not necessarily call for a reading in which the author’s intentionality in employing such literary devices is taken into account, consciously, by the reader. The writing method here invites the reader to accept Thompson as having lived whatever exploit he describes without forcing a realisation, on an analytical level, that Thompson was there to write a piece in the first place. He seems only to have *happened* to write about it, incidentally, as it were.

Thompson’s description of the origin of Gonzo in an early interview for *Playboy Magazine* is an overt example, and summary, of this naturalising process. When asked to define Gonzo he himself claims that it is, in a sense, an *accidental* method of writing:

It was one of those horrible deadline scrambles and I ran out of time. I was desperate ... I was convinced I was finished, I’d blown my mind, couldn’t work. So finally I just started jerking pages out of my notebook and numbering them and sending them to the printer. I was sure it was the last article I was ever going to do for anybody. Then when it came out, there were massive numbers of letters, phone calls, congratulations, people calling it a ‘great breakthrough in journalism’ ... It was like falling down an elevator shaft and landing in a pool full of mermaids. (Vetter, 1974: 88)

This is a fair summary of the mythic aspect of Gonzo which I have been discussing; something that *just happened*, and, accepted without critical consideration of its operation, this myth of Hunter Thompson as living rebel who *just happens* to write can obscure the known fact of Thompson as professional writer.

This is true at least insofar as the Gonzo Text does not demand that the lived experiences which Thompson narrates be read and understood exclusively in terms of the category of ‘a journalist’s reports’, even though that is something that they are. This is mythic communication, in which, as Barthes notes:

I respond to the constituting mechanism of myth, to its own dynamics, I become a reader of myths ... the reader lives the myth as a story at once true and unreal. (Barthes, 1973: 128)

One reason that the functioning of the Hunter Thompson myth might be seen to create a methodological difficulty is that it is not possible to create a meaningful understanding of Thompson’s body of work without recourse to this myth. There is a danger, however, that in studying the myth itself, and the legend surrounding Thompson as a celebrated socio-cultural outlaw, the texts themselves will become overly theoretically subordinated to the myth: i.e., that the writing will come to appear simply as one – perhaps almost inessential – part of the mythic framework in which Hunter Thompson (not without the help of cultural processes which were external to his work) situated himself. Here I am again referring to interviews, biographies, media texts produced by others to document Thompson’s political activism, lifestyle, or both; documentaries and feature films (see for example *Breakfast with Hunter*, 2004; *Gonzo: The Life and Work of Dr. Hunter S. Thompson*, 2009; *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, 1998; *Where the Buffalo Roam*, 1980; *Buy the Ticket, Take the Ride: Hunter S. Thompson on Film*, 2006) created about him which focus to a greater or lesser extent on his work itself; and so on and so on.

The aforementioned *Playboy* interview, published in 1974, is in fact, when considered as a whole, an illustrative example of such a text. Examining the piece carefully for more than its superficial content yields evidence suggesting that in 1974 it was already

apparent that Thompson's existence as a prominent cultural figure – a celebrity of a sort – did not particularly note or emphasise the fact that he was, by profession, a writer. Introducing Hunter Stockton Thompson before commencing the interview proper, Craig Vetter takes pains to establish not only Thompson's writing credentials, but his credentials as a rebel, listing the different outlandish reasons for which he was fired from his various jobs, e.g., *'for destroying his editor's car ... he insulted an advertiser and kicked a candy machine to death'* (Vetter, 1974: 75).

Continuing in this vein, Vetter devotes eleven of the first fourteen questions in the main body of the interview to Thompson's already famous penchant for substance abuse; as he puts it to Thompson, 'your image as the drug-crazed outlaw journalist' (Vetter, 1974: 76); and then devotes much of the remainder of the piece to questions about Thompson's riding with the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang, and trying to mobilise the Freak Power ticket in Aspen politics as a militantly subversive political organiser and campaign manager. Finally he moves the interview on to ostensibly 'capital P' politics in order to discuss President Richard Nixon (who resigned while the piece was being worked on). The interview does not, on the whole, present a complicated picture of Thompson, and tellingly, his writing and indeed his journalistic career in general are themselves focussed on far less than his political opinions, his drug use, and, generally, his adventures.

While the article does include a short series of questions about Gonzo journalism as well as some other questions directly related to writing, the focuses of the interview are clearly drugs, politics and the Hell's Angels, in that order. The myth of the Gonzo journalist is woven into the piece, in which it seems clear that the interviewer, (and presumably the readers of *Playboy*,) were more interested in hearing about Thompson's

experiences themselves – the lifestyle of the ‘outlaw journalist’ – rather than Thompson’s actual work, which is made to appear, in any case, as an accidental result of the Gonzo lifestyle, rather than any kind of cause or motivation (Vetter, 1974: 75-90, 245-6). This interview was in many ways typical of the plethora of writing about Thompson and, I would argue, a good example of the cultural process by which the legend and myth of ‘The Doctor of Gonzo Journalism’ gained potency.

Adopting a similar focus in attempting the study of Hunter Thompson and Gonzo would, however, neglect the possibility that, at least in some ways, Thompson’s existence as a cultural figure is grounded in his writing, as well as in his status as author, and would also fail to produce an adequate understanding of his method, Gonzo journalism, which was, it must be remembered, essentially a *writing* process. In this sense the production of the texts themselves was, and must have been, central (whether that production was a happy accident or not – a question which does not, in fact, require any kind of definite answer, in terms of the study of the Gonzo Text’s operation). Consideration of the method’s self-publicising, self-mythologising aspects, which is, I should stress, an indispensable part of investigating the journalism of Hunter Thompson, nonetheless cannot be permitted to obliterate this centrality. The apparent problem is, however, illusory. Thompson’s cultural existence as interrelated myth, author-status, and body of work may be studied as a cultural artefact, without the need to perform the impossible task of theoretically and/or methodologically separating one aspect from another, with help from theories of the Text, the work, and the Author formulated by Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault, through which these apparent difficulties cease to be insurmountable (although they do not, in fact, disappear altogether).

In *From Work to Text*, Barthes defines the Text as plural, in a very specific sense:

not simply to say that it has several meanings, but that it accomplishes the very plural of meaning: an *irreducible* (and not merely an acceptable) plural ... The plural of the Text depends, that is, not on the ambiguity of its contents but on what might be called the *stereographic plurality* of its weave of signifiers (etymologically, the text is a tissue, a woven fabric). (Barthes, 1977b: 159)

He goes on to assert that the Text, considered as analogous to a network of meanings, is to be considered without recourse to the 'guarantee of the father' which is authorial authority and perceptible intention (Barthes, 1977b: 161). In this sense, it is possible to argue that the object of study, the Gonzo journalism of Hunter Thompson can, without difficulty, transcend the corpus of Thompson's works themselves, inasmuch as the mythic structures to which I have previously referred can simply be said to be part of the Text.

There are, however, complications to be addressed when adopting this type of approach.

Barthes argues, regarding the position of the author within the Text:

It is not that the Author may not 'come back' in the Text, in his text, but he then does so as a 'guest'. If he is a novelist, he is inscribed in the novel like one of his characters, figured in the carpet; no longer privileged, paternal, aletheological, his inscription is ludic. He becomes, as it were, a paper-author: his life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work; there is a reversion of the work on to the life (and no longer the contrary); it is the work of Proust, of Genet which allows their lives to be read as a text. (Barthes, 1977b: 161)

Examining this argument, it is tempting to say that this is exactly the way that Thompson, and indeed his life, must be considered. To do so, would, however, be to ignore several problems. For one thing, Thompson-as-writer, in his journalism, is not a novelist, and is not operating as a novelist within the Text. His specific position as writer does not fit the pattern. Also, Thompson-as-character is the main character of his works, not simply as a narrator (whether absent or present) but as the subjective source of the works themselves, openly and overtly chronicling his own, and indeed only his own, subjective experience of reality.

The figure of Thompson within the Gonzo Text exists in a complex relationship to the notion of 'truth', and here I do not mean some external, objective truth, but the specific, intrinsic 'truth' of and within the Gonzo Text. He is and is not a provider of truth, and the narrative itself can be read as something which is and is not truth, is and is not fantasy, is and is not simply lies. The Text cannot easily be classified as fiction or as non-fiction, and the figure of Thompson within it is neither the narrative voice of fiction nor the ostensibly objective voice of conventional journalism. The narrative voice in Gonzo is not even, as I shall come to discuss, the subjective portrayal of a supposedly objective truth (see especially Chapter One), which is a quality of the voice of traditional literary journalism. It is because the positioning of the authorial voice/presence is inherently unclassified, and thus unstable, that the theory Barthes formulates regarding the place of the novelist as a fictional inscription of himself within the novel does not automatically encompass the peculiarities of the Gonzo Text. This is not to say that the theory cannot be employed in this way, but rather that the theory cannot be employed without consideration of the differences between the specific Text under consideration and the models which Barthes constructs.

If the circumstances are different because the place of the author is different, then the question becomes one of defining the exact function of the author, when the author is one Hunter S. Thompson, a journalist whose specific writing method employs the figure of the author complexly within the Text. If that is the matter at hand, then the broader question which must first be asked is, obviously, what is, more generally, the definition of the function of an author within a Text? In *What is an Author?*, Foucault refers repeatedly to what he calls 'the author function' as a form of status afforded to certain writers, or more accurately afforded to the ideas we have of them (James Joyce is the

Author of *Ulysses* but I am only the writer of my shopping list) which is then deployed as an element of the discourses of which ‘the Author’s works’ form a part (Foucault, 1984). He grounds his theory of the disappearance of the Author, and the possibility of a move towards abandoning the author function and embracing an indifference to the matter – ‘What difference does it make who is speaking?’ (Foucault, 1984: 120) – within an account of discourses endowed with the author function.

This is an account which does not, however, necessarily, unproblematically account for literary journalism (as it is currently constituted), and, I would argue, will face further difficulties with the peculiarity of Gonzo journalism. This is not, it should be stressed, simply because a subjective account of an objective reality (which is the definition, albeit itself a somewhat unstable one, of literary journalism) positions the figure of the Author/narrator ambiguously in relation to the distinction between fiction and non-fiction. This complicates the operation of the author function, but, in the case of Gonzo, the operation of the indispensable myth of the Gonzo journalist, and the perhaps dispensable stamp of authorial authority, are also mutually entangled with the figure of the author as complexly inscribed, as both character and narrator, within the fabric of the Text.

In *The Death of the Author*, Barthes argues against the accepted positioning of the author as the cipher through which the Text is to be interpreted. With reference to the theory of the Text as plural, he asserts that:

In the multiplicity of writing, everything is to be *disentangled*, nothing *deciphered*; the structure can be followed, ‘run’ (like the thread of a stocking) at every point and at every level, but there is nothing beneath: the space of writing is to be ranged over, not pierced; writing ceaselessly posits meaning ceaselessly to evaporate it, carrying out a systematic exemption of meaning. (Barthes, 1977a: 147)

The argument for the removal of the author as key to ‘deciphering’ a Text is compelling, but the disentanglement which is to replace it is, in Gonzo, complicated by the entanglement of the author-as-character with the author-as-myth. This is the case because the myth of the author, in Gonzo, comes between the reader and the Text, like a veil or sleight of hand, naturalising, as I have said, the origin and function of the Text. At the same time the style, which is an aspect of the myth, emphasises and foregrounds the very authorial presence which is obscured and naturalised by the functioning of the myth. This is a part of the reason why, while the use of a vibrant style in the creation of a first person narrative is not, of course, necessarily a complication for poststructuralist conceptions of the Author, the stylistic aspects of the texture of Gonzo are also an indispensable aspect of a full understanding of the role of the Author within the Gonzo Text.

In Foucault’s theory, dealing specifically with fiction, there is the assertion that:

Everyone knows that, in a novel narrated in the first-person, neither the first-person pronoun nor the present indicative refers exactly either to the writer or to the moment in which he writes, but rather to an alter ego whose distance from the author varies, often changing in the course of the work. (Foucault, 1984: 112)

He goes on to argue that the author function, as difference or distance between the author and the ‘real writer’, operates within a similar space as that between the author and the alter ego that is the narrative voice of fiction (Foucault, 1984: 112). The theoretical complications here begin with the possibility of works which are not straightforwardly classifiable as novels and which authorise readings within which, no, not everybody knows that, and, in fact (perhaps erroneously), the reader knows (or at least is reading as if she knows) the opposite, but which are nonetheless read, in some respects, as fiction. The mode of reading requested (or perhaps demanded) by Hunter Thompson’s Gonzo journalism conceals the difference/distance between the narrative

voice and the 'real writer'. The 'truth' or 'untruth' of the set of assumptions which the reader is thus called upon to accept is not, it should be noted in passing, in fact relevant to the matter at hand. The fact that Gonzo can be read, however, as an unclassified, irreducible blend of both truth (objective and/or subjective) and non-truth (in this case, subjective 'truth' not referring to an objective, external reality), as I will come to demonstrate, remains very much relevant.

Indeed, specific aspects of the Gonzo style can perhaps be read as encroaching on the space between the location of the actual act of writing and the location from which the writing is presented as having originated, within the Text. In places within Thompson's writing the origin of the narrative voice is situated in the here-and-now of the writing process – he writes, at times, about and from exactly where and when he has encamped to write the piece. Temporal distance between the work and the act of its being written is similarly, self-consciously discarded, as for example in various author's notes with which his books are prefaced. This method of placing emphasis on the figure of the author-as-he-writes, even before the nominal, official beginning of the text of the book, is part of how that figure is entangled in the construction of a reading of the Text.

Examples of this method include the opening sections of the author's notes for *The Great Shark Hunt*:

But before we get to the work, as it were, I want to make sure I know how to cope with the elegant typewriter – (and, yes, it appears that I do) – so why not make this quick list of my life's work and then get the hell out of town on the 11:05 to Denver? (Thompson 1980: 21)

And for *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*: '72:

Dawn is coming up in San Francisco now: 6:09 A.M. I can hear the rumble of early morning buses under my window at the Seal Rock Inn ... (Thompson, 1983: 15)

The use of this method is only one prominent example of the foregrounding of the specific authorial presence utilised in the construction of the Gonzo Text. As Nick Nuttall argues, 'Ultimately, Thompson trying to get the story *is* the story' and it is this that creates 'the apotheosis of the 'I' story' (Nuttall, 2007: 137). In other words, it is the unusual, 'apotheosised' authorial presence within these texts that enables the specific nature of this subjectivity, which I have previously discussed. As Nuttall observes of the Gonzo method:

Capote's fabled pinpoint accuracy is ditched in favour of a kind of authenticity which does not rely on the accumulation of facts so much as the accumulation of feelings, emotions, sensations. Who is to say that one is more 'truthful' than the other? (Nuttall, 2007: 137)

It is the presence of the subjective author, inscribed within the Text, which validates the Text's nature.

In the preface to *Sade/Fourier/Loyola*, Barthes makes reference to a certain concept of the author as encountered in the Text, which is perhaps also useful in considering the authorial presence in Gonzo:

The pleasure of the Text also includes the amicable return of the author. Of course, the author who returns is not the one identified by our institutions; ... he is not even the biographical hero. The author who leaves his text and comes into our life has no unity; he is a mere plural of 'charms', the site of a few tenuous details, yet the source of vivid novelistic glimmerings, a discontinuous chant of amiabilities, in which we nevertheless read death more certainly than in the epic of a fate, he is not a (civil, moral) person, he is a body.... For if, through a twisted dialectic, the Text, destroyer of all subject, contains a subject to love, that subject is dispersed, somewhat like the ashes we strew into the wind after death. (Barthes, 1976: 8-9)

Mowitt comments on this 'ghostly' authorial presence, that textuality (for Barthes, the bliss of the Text) can be seen to refer, in a sense, to 'the moment when the frame of one's analysis opens itself to the dispersion of the consciousness 'behind' the text – a dispersion that brings the ghostly body of the author and the body of the reader into contact' (Mowitt, 1992: 124-5).

The reader constructs a reading of a work according and corresponding, as it were, to the activation of some of the reader's desires in reading by some of the author's charms in writing (Mowitt, 1992: 124-5). This articulation of a theory regarding the relationship between author and Text, within a *reading*, does not necessarily impinge on a theorisation of authorial presence within Gonzo. It might, however, be possible to discern some possibility of interaction between the phantom author – a separate 'body' encountered in the reading of the Text, whose separateness is pleasurably overcome as the work-as-read is constructed by the reader – and the mythically ostensible collection of authorial 'charms' embodied within the Gonzo Text's unusual voice.

This is perhaps possible because the ghostly author encountered in the Text's separateness is, in a limited way, grounded in the 'real' distance between the 'real writer' and the reader. As I have intimated, the voice of the Gonzo Text attempts in various different ways not simply to deemphasise this distance but, actively, albeit via the illusory, to conceal it. In any case, Hunter Thompson's journalism is certainly situated within discourses endowed with the author function as Foucault defines it. The works composing Thompson's Texts employ methods such as those discussed above, as well and as part of utilising qualities of communication (e.g. the modes of rant, of diary, of musing – and, indeed, of journalism) which combine and interact with the myth Thompson created around himself. This can be seen as effectively foregrounding the author, as both product and feature of the Text, as a presence inextricable from readings of the work. This of course means that the complex authorial presence is to be engaged with as yet another thread of meaning which must be considered and taken into account by any attempt to disentangle the tapestry of the Text.

Wild Bursts of Madness

The overall aim of this inquiry is, as I have intimated, the fullest possible understanding of the meaning of the concept called ‘Gonzo journalism’. I have argued for the importance of theories of myth and of the role of the author in formulating this understanding. This study also requires the inclusion of theoretical explanations not only of the intrinsic nature of Gonzo journalism, which would begin with its definition as a category of communicative practice, but also of how this practice fits into wider discourses, socio-politically speaking as well as culturally, in terms of writing, of literature, and of journalism. In the examination of Thompson’s writing practice, I have made reference to the implications of Gonzo journalism being considered as journalism, in terms of the possible place of the author in journalism, as opposed to her place in fiction, within theories of the Text. This aspect of Thompson-as-author, however, barely begins to scratch the surface of the full theoretical implications of considering Gonzo journalism in terms of discourses surrounding the idea(s) of journalism itself.

One key aspect of the relationship between Gonzo journalism and theories of journalism is Gonzo’s problematic relationship with the traditional opposition, within journalism, of objectivity versus subjectivity. This relationship itself, as I will show (see especially Chapter One), has implications in terms of the opposition of fiction and non-fiction, but those implications arise first from the consideration of Gonzo journalism as situated within the category of ‘journalism’. In my preliminary considerations of the concept of the Author, in relation to the specific case of Hunter Thompson, I have referred to Gonzo journalism as a subset of journalism and, thus, implicitly, classified under the broad heading of ‘non-fiction’. In so doing I have leapt a yawning theoretical chasm while failing, thus far, to take note of so much as a crack. Journalism’s assumed status

as non-fiction is based, to a certain extent, on assumptions not just of factual accuracy but also of objectivity, and Hunter Thompson, in his coverage of the 1972 US Presidential election campaign, once wrote of journalistic objectivity: ‘As for mine ... well, my doctor says it swole up and busted about ten years ago’ (Thompson, 1983: 47-8). I do not believe that Gonzo journalism can be uncomplicatedly called non-fiction (which supposedly refers essentially to a reality which exists outside the writer), any more than it can easily be called fiction (which supposedly refers to a reality which exists inside her).

It can perhaps be asserted that the assumed conventions of literary classification dictate that a piece of writing is either fiction or non-fiction. (While a work may perhaps contain a mixture of both, the idea of a blend in which a given section of the work cannot be classified as either is to a greater extent inherently problematic.) The binary distinction between fiction as opposed to non-fiction is, however, inherently unstable, precisely because it is possible to discern objects within the field of literature, such as Gonzo journalism, which, in their undecidability within these terms, expose this instability.

In order to be perfectly clear from the outset what I mean when I employ the concept of ‘undecidability’, I offer the definition given by Derrida:

An undecidable proposition, as Gödel demonstrated in 1931, is a proposition which, given a system of axioms governing a multiplicity, is neither an analytical nor deductive consequence of those axioms, nor in contradiction with them, neither true nor false with respect to those axioms. (Derrida, 1993: 219)

Examples of Gonzo journalism can be demonstrated (or perhaps, deployed) to act as undecidable propositions, in this sense, within conventionally simplistic systems of literary classification. This has interesting implications and consequences, both for the

understanding of Gonzo journalism, and for some of the assumptions which underpin the aforementioned systems.

In a sense, non-fiction can be seen as defined by its referencing, representing and/or imitating a supposedly objective reality, while fiction exists in the same relationship but to a reality that does not exist except in the mind of the writer. Literary journalism or other types of creative non-fiction can thus be read as already destabilising this distinction, violating the purity of non-fiction as a category, as soon as they allow subjectivity to form a valid part of their ostensibly non-fictional discourses. Within such Texts, however, there remains the ontological assumption that there is in fact an external reality, albeit one that is now openly being subjectively interpreted by the writer, supposedly for the benefit of the reader's understanding and/or empathy. Gonzo journalism, by going one stage further and admitting to journalism not merely the subjectivity of the writer's response to the 'true event', but the subjective nature of the writer's reality itself, becomes different in kind, and not merely in degree, from literary journalism (even, often, from the New Journalism).

In *Fear and Loathing In Las Vegas*, which was originally published as (Gonzo) journalism in *Rolling Stone Magazine*, Thompson includes hallucinations and fantasies in the reality to which he refers (Thompson, 2005a). In the political reportage which was collected in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail: '72* he includes fantasies (otherwise known as outlandish and spectacular lies, including the famous, groundless claim that Edmund Muskie was addicted to the drug ibogaine) in election coverage (Thompson, 1983: 151-4). Though he distorts notions of conventional reality, explicitly or implicitly asserting the validity of essentially subjective experience (not so much in the sense that such experience is the 'truth', as that the concept of truth itself is, given

the subjectivity of experience, not relevant), he is not taken to be writing fiction, and he is also not rejected as a bad journalist on the usually serious charge (at this time, in this culture) of inaccuracy.

Thompson is a journalist who mysteriously remains employed as a political reporter covering an election campaign (albeit for *Rolling Stone Magazine*) despite publishing the sentiment: 'With the truth so dull and depressing, the only working alternative is wild bursts of madness and filigree' (Thompson, 1983: 93). He can write that and continue to be accepted as a political reporter, of a kind, and it can't be just because people think he's joking. His coverage of that election (which conventional wisdom would assume would be an event which would bring out the objective discipline in a reporter, if anything would) clearly showed that wild bursts of madness and filigree were indeed common elements in the work, and the Text, which he constructed. In a way this was analogous to the theoretical distinction between positivism and social constructivism, inasmuch as the notion in conventional journalism that there is a 'truth', external and knowable, to be reported, is replaced by the suggestion that there is only experience, and that there is no meaningful distinction between the real, the imagined, and/or the hallucinated. It is journalism which in a sense rejects the concept of the external 'true event' to be reported, a concept which is, arguably, a bedrock principle of the idea of journalism.

In *Between Fact And Fiction: The Problem of Journalism*, for example, the crucial problem to which Edward Jay Epstein's title refers is 'the problem of approaching truth in journalism' (Epstein, 1975: ix), framing the issue of truth primarily in terms of factual accuracy and criticising, for example, William Manchester's inclusion of fiction within *The Death of a President* (Manchester, 1996), a purportedly historically accurate

account of the assassination of JFK (Epstein, 1975: 120-141). Yet, despite the extreme importance placed on 'truth' within journalism, Hunter Thompson's work, crucially, was accepted, and even lauded, as journalism, for all its failings in terms of traditional concerns regarding objectivity and accuracy.

Gonzo journalism was not barred from the journalism canon, Hunter Thompson was not disgraced or fired for bad journalistic practice, and he was not castigated for the journalist's mortal sin of factual inaccuracy, though, as I have said, inaccuracies which would be expected to end a journalist's career abound in his work (see especially Chapter Two). This failure of the usual categories of good and bad, accurate and inaccurate journalism occurs, I feel, because it comes to be understood, in a sense, that Thompson is still a journalist, but one who is reporting the truth of a subjective reality, all his own. It is the largely unprecedented presentation of a different level of subjectivity, within journalism, which Thompson used to illustrate, illuminate, reflect and, indeed, satirise the conventional reality his culture's members hold in common. This was perhaps a defining practice of Gonzo journalism.

In attempting to assess Gonzo in this way, I am working within a theoretical framework mapped out by Jacques Derrida, whose work provides tools for such examination of the instability of categorical assumptions within culture. In *Dissemination*, Derrida grounds his discussion of the implications of undecidables in a consideration of Plato, and a complex argument that centres on the concept of mimesis (Derrida, 1993: 139), and the oppositions, which he alleges to be central to Western thought of, among others, truth as opposed to untruth, and speech as opposed to writing (Derrida, 1993: 85). I believe it will be fruitful to consider Gonzo journalism in terms of these aspects of Derrida's work, since Derrida destabilises (I hesitate to say 'deconstructs', and pick up all the

associated theoretical baggage) categories and assumptions within which Gonzo journalism cannot be comfortably situated. Running through the argumentation which Derrida constructs around the pharmakon (which is the central intellectual construct of this work), feeding in Gonzo as the specific case, allows Gonzo to avoid classification in terms of categories into which it might, conventionally, be forced to fit, both to its detriment and to the detriment of any possible theoretical understanding of it.

The pharmakon, which Derrida introduces into a discussion of the nature of writing, in a sense represents the undecidable because it is a word whose polysemy is analogous to the concept of undecidability. To simplify Derrida's point considerably, the pharmakon is, to Plato, both medicine and poison, both dangerous and/or lethal drug, and beneficial agent of healing. In ancient Greek the word can mean either, but the essence of the point is that it cannot be used to mean either without retaining the possibility of meaning the other. In a sense, it must mean both at once (while also, simultaneously, retaining the possibility of meaning *either*) (Derrida, 1993: 70). Gonzo journalism, in being both and neither and either journalism and fictitious fantasy, in an irreducible blend, is in a sense what Derrida calls a pharmakon.

This concept of the pharmakon is deployed in many ways within Derrida's reading of Plato, including, crucially, the assertion that all writing is, at a basic level, explicitly a pharmakon. This assertion is contained in a reading of the myth of Theuth, the inventor of writing, who asserts, in relation to speech, that writing is a remedy (pharmakon) for forgetfulness only for it to be judged as harmful (also a pharmakon) to memory (Derrida, 1993: 126). It is important to understand that the pharmakon is not, however, simply functioning as an example of the roots of such instability within the oppositions which underpin and compose Western thought; rather,

it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed, the medium and the play that links them among themselves, reverses them or makes one side cross over into the other (soul/body, good/evil, inside/outside, memory/forgetfulness, speech/writing etc.) (Derrida, 1993: 127)

So as the pharmakon exists within thought, as destabilising presence and medium of the instability at the borders of opposites, so Gonzo, I would contend, exists within writing, a specific site and agent of instability.

Derrida's construction of mimesis is one part of the articulation of these concepts which can be profitably employed in my attempt to assemble the theoretical framework necessary in order to demonstrate that Gonzo can be considered as undecidable, and as in some sense akin to the pharmakon. Derrida theorises that the concept of mimesis, which governs the understanding of all forms of representation, including writing as a representation of both thought and speech, contains or implies the notion that imitation when perfected is no longer in fact imitation at all, since 'the imitator would become another being no longer referring to the imitated' (Derrida, 1993: 139). For Derrida this construction, like that of the pharmakon, is rooted in the relation between speech and writing, and the latter's theoretical subjugation to the former. Looking at this notion, that phonetic writing (still a pharmakon), essentially recording speech, ceases to be imitation inasmuch as it is perfect imitation, representative of speech rather than interpretive of it, I am able to return again to Gonzo journalism.

Gonzo journalism, considered as a mimetic practice, imitative and representative of an object, thus does not derive its fundamental imperfection only from being writing (i.e. an imitation of reality) but also, to an extent, from the imperfect, undecidable, blended nature of its object: a reality which is in a sense neither true nor false nor neither nor both, but itself undecidable, part of the substance of the pharmakon. It is this theoretical position which allows the assertions I have previously made surrounding the idea that

Gonzo journalism's being accepted within the boundaries of journalism, despite its adoption of not merely a subjective viewpoint in its voice but a subjective reality as its reference, violates those boundaries from within. In this way, neither fiction nor non-fiction, Gonzo journalism certainly becomes undecidable on these terms, and operates as what Derrida called a *pharmakon*.

If this undecidability, this unclassifiability, is examined rather than summarily dismissed, (as for example by classifying it as New Journalism or literary journalism, and thus abrogating the responsibility to complete the theorisation of its operation) then the nature of this *pharmakon*, this imitation of a subjective reality, can, perhaps, destabilise the conventions, even those concerned with the nature of understood reality itself, which underpin these shaky categories. Derrida noted that: 'Apprehended as a blend and an impurity, the *pharmakon* also acts like an aggressor or a housebreaker, threatening some internal purity and security' (Derrida, 1993: 128). In this case, the violation of the categories of fiction and non-fiction threatens the internal purity and security of the notion of a straightforward distinction between the possibilities of subjectivity and objectivity, and highlighting the epistemological problem of the existence, or not, of objective truth itself, for journalism.

Thompson himself, incidentally, wrote of both his own work and the concept of objectivity in journalism in much the same way. Recognising the weakness or instability of the concept, he asserted that objective journalism, as a phrase, is 'a pompous contradiction in terms' (Thompson, 1983: 48) citing the feed from a security camera and occasionally numerical data such as sports scores as the only examples of objectivity he can recall, precisely because they alone are merely displayed rather than interpreted. There is, however, more to Gonzo's violation of categorical boundaries than

the way the Text places an emphasis on the difficulties of objectivity in journalism, which would be an operation that is far from unprecedented within journalistic discourses.

The destabilisation of the borders of the discipline of journalism by Gonzo can be seen as a specific case of what Mowitt, who explores this area in considerable depth, calls the antidisciplinary nature and/or power of concepts of the Text itself, since he argues that:

When we approach particular examples of cultural artifacts as texts (that is, as constructs of the interactions between a signifying practice and a methodological field), we are trying to comprehend how what eludes us in our interpretation has to do with the limits imposed upon our construction by the field in which it is executed. (Mowitt, 1992: 45-6)

In making the argument that Text opposes the formulation of academic, or perhaps more broadly, intellectual ‘discipline’, Mowitt asserts that the type of disentangling examination of texts as examples of Text which I am here attempting to map out, will by its nature undercut the formation of the boundaries of disciplines in general, such as ‘journalism’, as field of both practice and study. In considering Gonzo as Text and as pharmakon, it can be seen, as destabilising agent, operating in the specific, attacking the boundaries I have here delineated, in much the same manner that the concepts of Text and pharmakon have been argued to perform, by their very nature, in the general case. This illustrative correspondence of specific case to general theory is part of the benefits to be reaped from the specific consideration of Gonzo journalism in these terms, but is by no means coextensive with the theoretical ground that can fruitfully be explored through Gonzo.

A multiplicity of theoretical aspects of the Text can be seen to operate in concert in Gonzo journalism, constructing the tapestry of the Gonzo Text, whose disentanglement and theoretical consideration can enable nuanced exploration of various discourses of

which Gonzo forms a part, and discursive practices with which Gonzo is linked. For example, consider the previously delineated deployment of a subjective reality as the understood reference of Gonzo journalism, which is situated, as I have argued, within a discourse of journalism, and thus within the auspices of non-fiction. Assuming this status as journalism while at the same time implicitly rejecting the concept of the 'true event' which, arguably, underpins many of the key concepts of journalism, including accuracy itself, is, I feel, made possible by the mythic nature of Gonzo, which I have previously elaborated with reference to Barthes.

These operations are, if not mutually enabling, certainly mutually entangled. It is the mythic aspect of Gonzo as a communication practice which allows for the simultaneous foregrounding of authorial presence and disappearance of authorial intent which is, in turn, perhaps a condition of possibility for the existence of this particular pharmakon. This also enables the transcending of the conventional boundaries between what is and is not journalism, inasmuch as journalism is supposed to present the truth, as well as between 'good journalism' (which conforms to accepted standards of journalistic practice) and 'bad journalism' (which does not).

Within these conventional classifications, as I have said, Gonzo's departures from objectivity and, indeed, from reference to objective reality, would not usually be classed as non-fiction at all, and certainly not as journalism. The way in which Gonzo transcends these categories, however, can be read as allowing it to slip through the cracks between fiction and non-fiction, as it were, and into the assumed sanctity of the category of journalism. The relationship between the deployment in Gonzo of aspects of undecidability and of aspects of mythic communication, however, creates a place for Gonzo within these categories, and is essential to understanding both the hybrid nature

of Gonzo journalism and the cultural implications of that nature, both for journalism, and for wider discourses on writing. In a sense it is the disappearance of the writer (as intentional, as professional, as producer of the text) that allows for the place of the Author within the Gonzo Text, as originator, at once invisible and pre-eminent, of both text and Text, and of the mythic reality to which each text, and indeed, the Text itself, refers.

Freak Power

This mythic communication, and the attendant distortion of conventional reality, also has socio-historical conditions of possibility and validity within an authorised discourse of journalism. It will thus of course be important to integrate into my overall argument an examination of Gonzo's place within the web of culture in which it was produced. This inclusion of a more conventionally 'literary' angle of approach is entirely in keeping with my stated adherence to theories of the Text, which, in a way, advocate the integration not of all possible readings, but of all possible approaches to a reading. The place of Gonzo in wider society, culture, politics, history, any or all of the aforementioned, is also entangled in the Text. It is worth noting that these changing socio-historical conditions facilitate not just the Gonzo Text, but the theories of the Text itself which I am here employing, and this is not in any way a coincidence.

The theories I am using, from Barthes, Foucault and Derrida come, like Gonzo, from the late 1960s and 70s and there is a reason, beyond the fact that France, (where these theorists worked,) like Thompson's America, saw social and political upheavals and instability in this period. Mowitt, in mapping the genealogy of the Text itself, sheds some light on the reasons why the methods to which I am referring gain validity in

literary and journalistic discourses at roughly the same time that they are theorised in terms of the Text. The link which he describes between the two effects is not causal, one provoking the other; but rather that both are caused by the same changes – the death of the author is not a discovery which is invented, but rather an event which is chronicled:

The theories of the text ... were produced by human agents who could no longer comprehend their own experience as intellectuals in terms of the model of subjectivity latent within the author function ... because the social conditions that sustained the coherency of the author as an instance of subjectivity had been remapped during the period of the text's sociogenesis. (Mowitt, 1992: 75)

It is possible to make an argument that the same shifts in these 'social conditions', which prompt the announcement of the death of the author and the formulation of theories of the Text, are implicated in the development of new approaches to subjectivity within the production, as well as the theorisation, of literature.

I am here treating journalism as in a sense a subset of literature, and in the case of these new approaches I mean not only Gonzo journalism, but other innovative practices of the time, whether Capote's 'non-fiction novel'⁴ or simply the various experiments in subjective reportage that came (or not, as the case may be) to be referred to as the New Journalism (see Wolfe, 1990; Johnson, 1971). If this case is to be made, however, it will obviously be necessary to attempt to explain just what these shifts were, and what prompted them. Mowitt grounds his construction of these issues in the assertion that the change in social conditions was a realignment of categories of experience grounded in the concept of what is 'public':

Precipitating this remapping of the social was the deep structural transformation of what Habermas calls the public sphere, where the theatres of subjectivity, the public and private domains, had been realigned thus provoking a crisis in the categories created by intellectuals within the public sphere to comprehend the experiences organized by it. Within the domain of publicity, whose borders now

⁴ For a fuller account of the term, see Plimpton (1966).

extend into areas previously either untouched by it or indifferent to its presence, new forms and organs of communication proliferated. (Mowitt, 1992: 75)

This shift is prompted by changes, technological and cultural, in both the reach and organisation of mass-culture itself, during the period under consideration (Mowitt, 1992: 75-6).

It is a shift which collapses and/or distorts conventional categories of what is private and what is public, as well as what is subjective and what is objective. The encroachment of what had previously been considered 'private' (which can include the terms 'personal' or 'individual') into the cultural space of the public, as well as the encroachment of the subjective (as in 'subjective experience') into the sacred ground of 'objective truth', are developments that can be seen to enable both the validity of Gonzo within the discourses which it invades, and the rise of the theories of the Text which are necessary for Gonzo to be understood. This is, of course, another aspect of the specific socio-historical conditions of Gonzo which calls for disentanglement in the consideration of the Gonzo Text.

Within this area there are also more practical (perhaps seemingly mundane, but still essential) matters to consider, in, for example, the conditions in society at large. Specifically, such aspects of the Text include the existence of suitable employers for Thompson, such as *Scanlan's Monthly* and *Rolling Stone Magazine*, who are willing to allow him the freedom to write the way he does. Also, more generally, these social factors play a part in authorising his methods themselves, within a wider discourse of journalism. While I do not feel Gonzo journalism to be a part of the New Journalism, (though others do – see, for example, Wolfe, 1990,) one practical example of these factors and conditions is an aspect of the perceived journalistic revolution which the

New Journalism constituted, which can arguably be seen as enabling or helping to enable Thompson's journalistic methods.

Thompson, similarly to those other practitioners of non-fiction who began to be referred to as writers of 'the New Journalism', used copious research to gather the information and experiences which he used as the source material for Gonzo journalism. While this did not make Thompson a New journalist, Tom Wolfe argues in *The New Journalism* that the time and resources necessary to perform extensive research, which was a luxury which journalists had often previously been denied, came to be more easily available to journalists in this period at least in part because it was recognised as a prerequisite for the writing of the popular New Journalism. He further argues that these writers were the inheritors of the tradition of the realist novel, which was tied, in terms of detail at least, to the requirement for more immersive research than that called for by conventional reporting (Wolfe 1990: 46-7).

Though he did not in fact employ this style, or all other aspects of the New Journalism methodology, Thompson could be argued to have benefitted from this change in the American journalistic landscape. Edward Jay Epstein had defined the situation which had not allowed journalists to perform such research as journalism's most pressing difficulty:

The problem of journalism in America proceeds from a simple but inescapable bind: journalists are rarely, if ever, in a position to establish the truth about an issue for themselves, and they are therefore almost entirely dependent on self-interested 'sources' for the version of reality that they report. (Epstein, 1975: 3)

Gonzo journalism benefitted from the resources, including time, which demand for New Journalism helped to secure for journalists, not simply because Thompson was able to establish the truth for himself rather than relying on secondary sources, but because of a

somewhat different utilisation of the direct knowledge he gained from being able to experience, or at least encounter first-hand, the subject matter of his reportage.

This enabled, in the case of Gonzo, not just the greater accuracy and independence which Epstein was calling for, but the subjectivity and use of personal experience as source material which underpins, to a greater or lesser extent, every aspect of Gonzo which I have delineated or disentangled in this work so far (e.g. the myth of Hunter Thompson the outlaw journalist, and writing ostensible non-fiction with reference to a subjective reality). It was also, as I have stated here, arguably enabled by changes in accepted journalistic working practices which were socio-historically specific to the era and culture in which Gonzo journalism was formulated. This aspect of Gonzo's conditions of possibility is but one point of interaction with the specific discourse of journalism in the time and place of its production, illustrative of the wider point that Gonzo obviously did not originate in a vacuum, and that an understanding of the historical conditions of its production represents more of the threads of meaning entangled within the weave of the Gonzo Text.

Another crucial aspect of Gonzo's relationship to specific socio-historical conditions within wider cultural discourses is raised by my consideration of Gonzo journalism as accepted, in some senses, as journalism. This point has underpinned my discussion of Gonzo's interpretation and implications as a *pharmakon*, with regard to distinctions between fiction and non-fiction, and the boundaries of discourses of journalism. This will of course oblige me to describe and demonstrate to some extent the truth of that acceptance having occurred, and the form(s) which it took (see especially Chapter Two). That is probably best presented as a separate argument, but it is certainly relevant to the reception of Gonzo into wider cultural arenas that contemporary developments in

American society helped to authorise, for example, the depiction of drug experience as legitimate experience (see especially Chapter One). Speaking more generally, the conditions of possibility of the militantly subjective perspective of much of Hunter S. Thompson's political reportage also cannot be disentangled from the social, historical and political conditions, and the arguable atmosphere of instability and change, of the period within American culture in which he was writing, and to which, now as then, the writings which comprise Gonzo journalism ostensibly, in some respects, refer.

I should stress here that it is not my intention to consider Thompson's writing as primarily (or ideally) accessible to analysis based on the consideration of the social and political upheavals of the period in which the texts were produced i.e. 'the Sixties'. As Vredenburg notes (with overtones of complaint), Gonzo is sometimes perceived as linked to ideas of the Sixties to the extent that 'In moments (or for audiences) with little room for 1960s nostalgia, Thompson is easily dismissed' (2013: 150-151). This decade can be viewed as a mythic concept itself, as well as a distinct historical period in American journalism and literature, and while I would not wish for this aspect of reading the Gonzo Text overly to dominate its interpretation, it is no more feasible to separate the writings from their times than it is to separate them from their legendary author. One aspect of the myth of the Sixties which is complexly entangled in the Gonzo Text would be the polarisation, or, more accurately, the representation of the polarisation of the social sphere into those aspects of culture and politics which were allied on the side of change and revolution (by which I mean those social forces which might fall under the labels of 'flower power', 'freak power', 'the acid wave' or simply 'hippies' and 'hippie culture') and those conservative and/or reactionary forces allied against it. It would nonetheless be a theoretical misstep to label Gonzo as part of the 'hippie' movement, identified primarily with a certain section of society.

Theories of the Text do not mesh well with such theoretical simplifications, as Mowitt notes, referring to analogous operations:

Insofar as the theoretical elaboration of the categories of race, class, sexuality, and gender fails to emphasise the way such instances problematize the very coherence and integrity of society (either as object or category) and this failure occurs whenever it is argued that a work *really is about*, say, class – this elaboration deserves to be criticized as anti-textual and finally essentialist. (Mowitt, 1992: 136-7)

It would perhaps be a mistake to limit the reading of Gonzo by suggesting that the Text is ‘really about’ the social upheavals of the Sixties, especially aspects directly related to ‘the hippies’. Nonetheless, Thompson’s writings, like other works from the period (and from other periods of relative cultural instability), interact complexly with the ‘changing times’ in which they were produced and disseminated. This is true of Gonzo not just in terms of practical conditions of production such as greater acceptance of more in-depth research for journalists, and also not just in terms of hippie culture. In the broadest possible cultural sense, the Text can be considered as both influencing and being influenced by the socio-political conditions of the time and place in which these works were produced, disseminated and read.

Norman Fairclough argues that it is relationships such as these that are what discourse analysis, as a method, is for: ‘Discourse is studied historically and dynamically, in terms of shifting configurations of discourse types in discourse processes, and in terms of how such shifts reflect and constitute wider processes of social change’ (Fairclough, 1992: 35-6). Consideration of the discourses in which Thompson’s works were written, published and read, is another entrance to the network of meanings which they represent. The texts themselves must be considered in terms of the circumstances in which they were produced, again in the broadest possible sense. Theories of the ‘New’ journalism of the period, for example, I feel fail to provide an adequate understanding

of Thompson's specific writing methods and their implications for the Gonzo Text. Wolfe's canonical theorisation of the New Journalism, for example, is, I would contend, an essentially affirmative critique of journalism, inasmuch as it is in fact 'a critique which interrogates foundations in order to fortify them against critical scrutiny from outside' (Mowitt, 1992: 43). This is relevant in terms of the perceived boundaries and foundations of journalism – precisely because the essence of what Wolfe's theory attempts is the explanation of how the 'New' Journalism is still journalism (Wolfe, 1990). This implicitly reinforces the contention that journalism itself remains, despite the revolution Wolfe perceives and defines within it, a valid and, in a sense, stable, category, concept, discipline.

Theories such as this, which in some sense defend the sanctity of the idea(s) of journalism are, obviously, not compatible with theoretical approaches which facilitate the study of the destabilisation and deconstruction of such categories. That being said, this does not mean that the idea that there was a perceived new movement in American journalism at the time of Gonzo's inception has nothing to do with understanding Gonzo journalism. Shifts in what was considered acceptable journalistic practice, linked with perceptions of the New Journalism, facilitate Thompson's being able, or, in a sense, allowed, to write in the way that he did – in terms of what was acceptable within the culture of the time, which can and does limit the possibilities of the output of even an 'outlaw' journalist.

The structures of American society were changing during the period in which he wrote these works. This is not to say that social structures ever stand still, but rather that the perception of social revolution was an important part of journalistic and literary discourses of the time, and that that perception is another necessary part of

understanding how Thompson's writing worked. This is particularly the case with those portions of his writing that are more or less overtly concerned with capital P political matters. Approaches informed by the theory of discourse analysis can productively be employed in the study of different aspects of the place of Hunter Thompson's writing in the 'times' in which he wrote. As Fairclough puts it: 'Discourse analysis can be understood as an attempt to show systematic links between texts, discourse practices, and sociocultural practices' (Fairclough, 1995: 16-17). There is a space for employing discourse analysis's tools for understanding all these things in the formulation of a full theory of Gonzo journalism.

In making this acknowledgement, I am aware that I may appear to be turning to the formal concept of discourse analysis, as described by Fairclough, as though I am in some sense turning away from Foucault, Barthes and Derrida, though this is not in fact the case. The reason for this theoretical point is, however, not simply a concern for socio-historical enquiry – it is not as if Foucault, Barthes and Derrida do not supply suitable tools for such work – but rather because, while Thompson as myth, author and creator of Text will be a central thread running through my examination of his journalism, through which other aspects must, to some extent, be interpreted, I feel it to be necessary, as I have said, also to ground my research thoroughly in consideration of the works themselves. As Fairclough argues, Foucault's discourse analysis, for example, is not so directly concerned with the analysis of acts of communication e.g. specific pieces of writing, as it is with the (also essential for study) conditions in which those acts are produced, and I feel both a more Foucauldian approach and what Fairclough calls 'textually-oriented discourse analysis' (Fairclough, 1992: 37-61), are helpful in attempting to understand Thompson's body of work.

I do not really accept, however, the notion that these must be distinct and separate methods of academic enquiry. In this examination of Gonzo, I use theories of the Text and related matters in order to examine how Hunter Thompson situates himself through and within the writing, and I also make use of textual analysis in order to examine other aspects which can be seen as more directly intrinsic to the texts as pieces of writing/literature. All of these methodologies amount to the pursuit of an understanding of the network of meanings of Hunter Thompson's Gonzo journalism. This examination includes the linguistic, literary methods and choices within the writings themselves, both because it is there that myth begins and because the writing must be understood first as writing before it can be examined as the vehicle of Thompson's mythic and political communications, if those communications are to be understood fully. (This may be considered, in Barthesian terms, as somewhat analogous to examining the signifier, as well as the signified, in order to understand the sign.) This analysis also attempts to situate the Text within 'history' (once again, using a word in the broadest possible sense), in terms of the journalistic content, but also in terms of style, methodology, and other relevant aspects of cultural politics.

In attempting such a multi-faceted analysis of such a complex Text, this examination of Gonzo is organised, loosely, along thematic lines, considering prominent themes of Gonzo journalism in terms of, hopefully, apposite theories. In Chapter One, I further develop my arguments regarding the complex subjectivity of Gonzo's narratives, primarily in terms of the representation, within the Text, of the theme of 'drugs'. In the section entitled 'A Relatively Respectable Citizen', I consider aspects of instability in the construction of the category 'drugs' and consider Thompson's implicit critique of the socio-political construction of 'the drug problem'. In 'A Living Human Body', I formulate a framework around a general concept I term 'receptivity', with reference to

the way receptors in the body are in some senses ‘naturally’ suited to their roles in drug consumption, looking at instabilities in the ideas of drugs as foreign substances, and of the conventional mind/body distinction. I delve further into the philosophical problems of hallucination, and of hallucinatory landscapes such as Las Vegas, in the section ‘Hallucinations Are Bad Enough’. In general, this chapter also looks at the links between society’s ideas of drugs and the ways in which Thompson interrogates not just drug laws, but the rules of journalism and of the conventional conceptions of the experience of reality, further examining the place of the Author within Gonzo, and beginning a fuller consideration of the socio-politically dissident character of the Text.

In Chapter Two, the thematic focus is Gonzo’s coverage of organised politics, considered with particular reference to Thompson’s rejection of the ideology of journalistic objectivity, which I attempt to place more thoroughly into the context of the history of American journalism, through perceptible links to older traditions of subjective, biased political reportage. In ‘The Realm of Speculation’ this context of non-objective political journalism is directly contrasted with the perceived shortcomings of journalistic ideologies of objectivity and professionalism in relation to the 1972 American election cycle. In ‘Cheap Thrills’ I introduce different aspects of Thompson’s concept of ‘edgework’, in terms of the possible implications of representations of risk and transgression within the political sphere. The chapter then moves to a discussion, in ‘At Least Neo-Respectability’, of Thompson’s problematic status as a non-objective journalist on the customarily anti-bias national politics beat. This section also considers some of the implications of Thompson’s political journalism as containing elements of apparently ultra-cynical critique, as well as progressive, even optimistic rhetoric of an inclusive, ‘Freak Power’ political agenda.

Following on from this exploration of the Gonzo Text's take on both American politics and the place of the journalist in literature and in society, in Chapter Three I use close readings of several examples of Gonzo journalism's coverage of big money, mass-media sports in America in order to illustrate further both the Gonzo representation of the corruptions and hypocrisies which Thompson sees in American society and culture, and the contradictions and instabilities which Gonzo emphasises within American ideologies and myths, such as those surrounding the valorisation of sporting excellence. In 'A Very Hard Dollar', a reading of Thompson's profile of Jean-Claude Killy, I look at the way Gonzo sports journalism emphasises social and political contexts of sport, such as commercial and consumerist encroachments on sports' imagined purities, and the possible complicity of conventional sportswriting in the corruption of sport. 'Pictures of the Riot' then turns to the way Thompson uses an examination of the social contexts of the Kentucky Derby in order to critique wider aspects of American society. This section also deals with the ostensible birth of Gonzo journalism, in terms of its distinctive style, and the ways in which that style can be seen to relate to Thompson's approach to American society and culture. Finally, 'This Bedrock Sense of Professionalism', looking primarily at Thompson's coverage of an NFL Super Bowl, considers the Gonzo critique of conventional, professional sports journalism, and the ways in which it can be seen uncritically to reproduce the publicity/marketing agenda of the corporate sports interests.

In the concluding chapter, I also attempt to elucidate more fully some of the complex links between these different themes and aspects of the Gonzo Text, while returning both to the idea of the character or persona of Hunter S. Thompson the drug-taking outlaw journalist, and to the prominent, perhaps central but certainly elusive theme of the death of the American Dream. In summary, I attempt to illuminate how these

disparate elements, of style and subjectivity, and of themes of political activism, edgework & self-creation, performances of 'receptivity' and of Gonzo as an interpretation of living the American Dream, interconnect in the creation, and meaning, of the Gonzo Text. This, of course, does not represent a 'complete' or 'correct' reading of Gonzo, since neither concept is applicable to an examination of a Text. My treatment of Gonzo is, by its nature, selective, both in terms of the works on which I choose to focus my enquiry, and in the approaches to the Text which I choose to adopt, but I hope nonetheless that within this work I have constructed a useful framework for the consideration of aspects of the Gonzo Text, while at the same time deriving theoretical tools and ideas which may have further use and wider application, both within Gonzo, and beyond it.

Chapter One - Fear and Loathing in Subjective Experience: Gonzo, Drugs and Receptivity

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?’ (Thompson, 2005a: 3)

It is not, on its face, an unreasonable question. What are these goddamn animals? And what, for that matter, is the ostensibly disembodied voice that is doing the screaming? The first paragraph of Hunter Thompson’s best-known work, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, is evocative, exuberant, engaging, and, upon close reading, considerably more complex than it may at first appear. Writing about the subjective experience of consciousness-altering drugs is never without its complications. Starting from scratch, we have here a narrative voice, remembering and recounting a drug experience. From the very beginning the text presents a complex internal reality, inasmuch as the reader is given to assume that, the drugs having taken hold, the bats are a chemically-induced hallucination while the rest of the scene (car, desert, Barstow etc.) is presumably, within the internal reality to which the text refers, real.

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas is a work that does not carry either of the usual labels of ‘fiction’ or ‘non-fiction’, being generally understood to have at least some basis in fact but not to have been produced with any commitment to factual accuracy. As its initial review in *The New York Times* put it:

‘Writing’ is as exact a label as the book will carry. Neither novel nor nonfiction, it arrives with fashion’s special sanction. Its roots are in the particular sense of the nineteen-sixties that a new voice was demanded – by the way people’s

public and private lives were coming together in a sensual panic stew, with murder its meat and potatoes, grass and acid its spice. How to tell the story of a time when all fiction was science fiction, all facts lies? (Woods, 1972)

Without the help of labels, the exact nature of the internal reality of the text, and its relationship with 'truth', is already complicated even before we consider the metaphysical implications of the difference between the respective existences of the car and of the bats. Regarding Thompson's use of a blend of the artificial categories of 'journalism' and 'fiction' in order to be as 'truthful' as possible, Russell goes so far as to assert that '*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, then, is his monument to this style of truthful reporting' (2012: 38).

The phrase 'I remember saying something like' reinforces the use of the first-person past-tense to separate, temporally, the Thompson who is remembering/writing from the Thompson who (maybe) experienced what is being remembered/written. In addition to this, the wording emphasises, through the fallibility of memory, that the author is emphatically not asserting a perfect knowledge even of the subjective experiences to be recounted. The reader is shown the bats *as* a hallucination by Thompson-the-Author (though he never says so in so many words), and knows that there is a writer recalling these experiences, emphasised by the human imperfection and incompleteness of these recollections. The reader also knows, of course, that it is Thompson doing the screaming, though Thompson-the-Character (-on-drugs) does not.

The voice of the work is that of a human being remembering subjective experiences which, thanks both to drugs and the rejection of journalistic objectivity, are not entirely classifiable as either real or unreal. Boothroyd notes that such literary interrogation of the intersection of the real and unreal constitutes an ongoing negotiation of the cultural politics of reality, and its boundaries:

In the context of the loosening of control over the grip consciousness has on reality which drugs can produce, this brings to light how there is always an ongoing negotiation *in language* about the distinction between the real and the imaginary. This negotiation always has social, cultural, institutional, personal, and no doubt other, parameters to it. (Boothroyd, 2006: 151)

In the work and in the Text, the drugs, or more precisely the drug experiences, in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, illuminate the performance of the negotiation of reality, though the actual presence of that negotiation is, in a sense, deferred or concealed behind the process of transforming subjective experience into literary representation. The author function standing between the reader and the experiences of the driver of that car, with the help of the common conception of recreational chemistry, displaces the question of hallucination.

The point becomes, on one level, the assertion that within this text the reader will be provided with an account of the memory of subjective experience under a number of consciousness-altering influences, the effect of which will not be externally verified, even by the author, and without even a guarantee that those experiences are being ‘truly’ remembered, given the fact that ‘fiction’ is a substance whose influence is never ruled out. But then ‘fiction’-as-drug is not a new idea, as Avital Ronell notes in her reading of addiction and/in *Madame Bovary*:

The horizon of drugs is the same as that of literature: they share the same line, depending on similar technologies and sometimes suffering analogous crackdowns before the law. They shoot up fictions, disjuncting a whole regime of consciousness. (Ronell, 1992: 78)

While I would consider the equation of the ‘horizons’ of drugs and literature to be from some perspectives a considerable oversimplification, the extent to which their assaults on a ‘whole regime of consciousness’ are mutually entangled, as well as the extent to which they are successful, will be examined further in this chapter.

In any case, the negotiation here, in the space between the always already negotiated concepts of 'reality' and 'art', both of whose categorical instabilities are already in play, touches on something that could be perceived as fundamental to the constitution of culture, in terms of the idea of 'truth' (whatever that may be). Drugs may here stand in for and/or blend in with, a very old secret ingredient of cultural objects considered as art; that of 'madness' (again whatever that may be). The instabilities and revelations of such an interrogation of narrative, mimetic structures and the plurality of subjectivities invoked may be considered as posing questions analogous to those which Foucault discerned in the intersection of culture and madness:

Inspiration or hallucination? A spontaneous babble of words, or the pure origins of language? Must its truth, even before its birth, be taken from the wretched truth of men, or discovered far beyond its origin, in the being that it presumes? The madness of the writer was, for other men, the chance to see being born, over and over again, in the discouragement of repetition and disease, the truth of the work of art. (Foucault, 1988: 286)

I do not mean here simply to assert some simple, *prima facie* equivalency between the undecidable subjectivity-on-drugs of Gonzo and what Foucault means by madness. I do intend some further exploration of how the latter might be brought to bear on the former, however this is not my primary intent here. The main point is the idea that the complex web of uncertainties within the fabric of the Text, which attend every level from the stylistic to the ontological, can be usefully examined using theoretical tools formulated during the ancient and ongoing study of art's encounter with the broad category of experience that might conventionally be named 'losing touch with reality'. Within this opening paragraph in Thompson's work, several levels of instability are encountered, in the hallucination, in the voice of the narrative, in the subjectivity of experience generally, and in the general problem of the representation of such subjective experience. In this plurality of instabilities, from reality to writer to Author to work to Text, drugs are deployed as the *pharmakon* – as the crack where the

madness/undecidability/bats creep in. The drugs, symbol and embodiment of subjective instability, take hold of everything.

A Relatively Respectable Citizen

In approaching disentangling *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, drugs are the thread running through everything, and are thus tangled up in every knot. The task is made more complex in that the idea of ‘drugs’ itself is unstable. What constitutes a drug? What exactly is it that is taking hold of Hunter Thompson and the Samoan attorney? In approaching the critical consideration of the place of drugs within a Text, it is important to understand that although drugs may appear to be a clearly defined idea, there are no stable definitions of drugs (on this point, see for example Chapter One of Goode, 1972). In fact, even the notion that ‘drugs’ are and must be physical substances which belong innately to the category through some intrinsic qualities they possess, is unstable. As recently as 1900 in America neither morphine nor heroin required either a prescription or much money, and the use of neither substance carried a social stigma (Duster, 1970: 3). The production of the modern myth of ‘drugs’ as intrinsically both criminal and immoral cannot be separated from the idea of the drug-user, inasmuch as ‘a chemical substance is not technically speaking a drug unless it is in an affective relationship with a living organism’ (Boothroyd, 2011). Like madness and the madman, the two concepts support, imply and presuppose each other. Thus a ‘drug’ cannot be a ‘drug’ in itself – it must be used as a ‘drug’ in order to be one. In a theorisation of drug use and addiction, building on work by Deleuze and Guattari, Peta Malins has gone so far as to argue that categories of people as drug-users and of substances as drugs should be abandoned in favour of an approach based on considering instances of drug-use as a totally heterogeneous category of event (Malins, 2004). Beyond such problems with defining

the category of ‘drugs’, others present themselves as soon as they are looked for within the various discourses in play.

The legal definitions of ‘drugs’ are subject to constant change, and are not, as a rule, founded on a coherent set of rational principles. The medical definitions, similarly, turn up constant anomalies, suggesting a subjective, if not actually arbitrary, system of constituting the boundaries of what is and is not a ‘drug’⁵. In both cases, foundational arguments regarding personal health and dangers to society are undercut by the irrational (on those terms) exemption of substances such as alcohol and tobacco. Indeed, Thompson emphasises the peculiarities of the legal definitions of ‘drugs’, within a consumerist society, in the text of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*:

On the outskirts of Vegas I stopped at a neighbourhood pharmacy and bought two quarts of Gold Tequila, two fifths of Chivas Regal and a pint of ether ... I told him I needed the ether to get the tape off my legs, but by that time he’d already rung the stuff up and bagged it. He didn’t give a fuck about ether ... I wondered what he would say if I asked him for \$22 worth of Romilar [commercial name of Dextromethorphan: a cough suppressant and, in high doses, a dissociative hallucinogen (EROWID, 2011)] and a tank of nitrous oxide. Probably he would have sold it to me. Why not? Free enterprise ... (Thompson, 2005a: 100-1)

Thompson here implicitly criticises the prohibition of ‘drugs’, and their official exile from the free exchange of goods, simply by observing that he can still buy several different substances which might be used as ‘drugs’ at any given small pharmacy in America.

This tension between licit and illicit pharmacologies is another aspect of the instability of ‘drugs’ as a concept, and one which maintains a strong presence in culture, as evinced for example by current debates on officially-sanctioned ‘mind-altering

⁵ One illustrative example of these confusions and instabilities might be the lay use of the term ‘narcotic’ as interchangeable with the term ‘drug’, even when referring to substances whose effects are not narcotic (Duster, 1970: 30).

chemicals' such as SSRIs and Ritalin, and their relevance to drug prohibition, informed by distrust of corporate pharmaceutical interests⁶. The peculiarities of what you can and can't buy at your local pharmacy, highlighted in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, are still at issue. A representation of the arbitrariness, inconsistencies, and perhaps even the essential futility of drug prohibition can be discerned in this passage, and one part of the problem may be that the boundaries of the definitions of 'drugs' are not stable, and will not hold.

It is interesting to observe that the structure of this critique is an echo of a meaning that Ronell finds in *Madame Bovary*, where, in a manner not unlike Thompson's neighbourhood pharmacy: 'The drug store figures a legalized reproach to uncontrolled street drugs but at the same time argues for the necessity of a certain drug culture' (Ronell, 1992: 96). Although the 'messages', if there are such things, may not be the same, the implied absurdities are certainly related. The pharmacist is not qualified to judge the pharmakon's undecidability, even in its manifestation in the materiality of 'drugs'. The vague, 'common-sense' definition of drugs as substances which are psychoactive, altering neurochemistry and thus consciousness, would necessitate the inclusion not just of chocolate, coffee and the like, but also, inevitably that of carbohydrate, music, sex and, *reductio ad absurdum*, all human experience, and is thus also intrinsically unstable. As has often been pointed out, in one form or another in the so-called 'drug debate', 'There are good and bad addictions, and anything can serve the function of a drug' (Ronell, 1992: 53). I should, however, make it plain that I do not intend here to argue that there are no such things as 'drugs', in that everything a human can experience can be considered as a drug i.e. in terms of neurochemical effect. My

⁶ These issues are considered in depth in Healy (2001).

intention, rather, is to deal with the cultural existence of ‘drugs’, and there is no argument that could meaningfully erase *the idea* from culture.

A case could perhaps be made for the socio-cultural utility of a category of ‘drugs’, however unstable and culturally contingent, if only in order to demarcate some type of pragmatic boundary between sobriety and its absence (a boundary whose instabilities will be probed in greater detail later in this chapter) in individuals and individual cases. There are, however, more complex ideological connections at work between the idea of ‘drugs’ and the negativity, anger and fear from which spring prohibitionist discourses (see Webster, 2008), particularly in terms of the source(s) of the badness (‘evil’ being out of fashion), of the danger, of the crime. These connections, whose instabilities Thompson emphasises again and again, can, however, be profitably examined in light of the invalidity of the concept of ‘drugs’ itself, before certain discourses conventionally calling themselves ‘rational’ and/or ‘scientific’. These ideas exist now, as when *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was being written, in a state of tension with the ‘scientific’ discourses which form a prominent part of the prohibitionist discourses which have come to be (in some senses, in some ways) unified under the banner of ‘The War On Drugs’.

These ideas of ‘drugs’ are founded to a certain extent on a cultural conception of an objective distinction between things which it is ‘natural’ for the human being to encounter/consume, and the other things, which are labelled as alien/foreign substances, artificial and/or unnatural. This conception of ‘natural’ in the behaviour of the human body is, it is worth noting, only very dimly related to any concept of ‘nature’. These ideas, however, can be considered as based on a set of assumptions about the body and the self which are not grounded in any given myth of existing within nature. This is

clear when within some readings of dominant cultural constructions surrounding ‘drugs’, it comes to seem ‘natural’ to relieve pain by consuming an industrially-produced, synthetic analgesic like codeine, while picking a wild Liberty Cap ‘magic’ mushroom and eating it becomes the abuse of a dangerous foreign substance.

Obviously, what constitutes ‘nature’ itself is, like all subjective concepts, to some degree an unstable category, but my purpose here is not immediately to attempt to descend a structure of concepts, founded on each other, in order to point out that from a social constructivist viewpoint all assertions of objectively constituted categories of human activity or experience are built on essentially shaky ground. That being said, the question of how a society conceptualises ideas of drugs is in play in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and in the savagery of its journey to the heart of the American Dream, and that conception of drugs is itself an ideological battleground. Its construction incorporates discourses of science, politics and law, where notions of the individual, personal freedom and social control are all fiercely contested. This is partly a result of the instability and internal inconsistencies, noted by scholars of the cultural history of drugs, present in conflicting discourses in this area, in which the statuses of ‘reason’ and ‘science’ are applied, ideologically, to myths of ‘drugs’:

The set of fears and concerns that people voice about drug use also concern ‘shifts in moral states’: insanity, sexual excess, crime, degeneration of the ‘human’ to less evolved (animal) states; or, conversely, cures for neurosis, sexual liberation, right livelihood, and union with God. We have not finished living through the confusion between the real and the mythical – in thinking about drugs, or in thinking about anything else. (Boon, 2002: 221-2)

While I would question the possibility of ‘finishing’ such confusion without a radical reconception of the ‘confused’ categories themselves, it is important to note the instability of the discourse. This instability is also inextricably entangled with this type of discourse’s incorporation of unreason-labelled-as-reason, which is capable of

affixing to almost any type of subversion, non-conformity or even simple individuality the labels of ‘degenerate’, un-‘human’ and/or un-‘natural’.

To digress slightly from the main thrust of this part of my thesis, it is worth taking note here that ‘drugs’, in this aspect of their construction as a very special sort of something-which-is-rejected, outside the conventional order, can perhaps be seen as coming to occupy a space possessing similarities and conceptual affinities with the results of what Foucault discerned in the moment of the confinement of madness, in the classical period:

Ultimately, confinement did seek to suppress madness, to eliminate from the social order a figure which did not find its place within it; the essence of confinement was not the exorcism of a danger ... Confinement is the practice which corresponds most exactly to madness experienced as unreason, that is, as the empty negativity of reason; by confinement, madness is acknowledged to be *nothing*. (Foucault, 1988: 115-6)

I draw tentative links here, once again, between ‘drugs’ and Foucault’s conception of the cultural history of madness. I do this not simply to draw analogies between the conflicts over ‘drugs’ and more general issues about social control, but rather to continue to examine how the ‘drug-user’ comes into being as one of a multiplicity of bogeymen of ‘rational’ society. These spectres represent specific aspects of an unspecifiable Other, inasmuch as the opposite of a ‘reason’ which cannot measure up to the standards of coherence it sets for itself is a hard thing to pin down, at least outside unreasonable myth.

There are always discrepancies and inconsistencies. To illustrate further the particular instabilities I’m talking about, one has only to reduce the issue of drugs, the so-called ‘drug debate’, to its legal dimension, and examine what happens when ‘drugs’ are placed (shoved?) into the discourse called ‘crime’. People do not campaign for the legalisation of burglary, run specialised shops openly selling any legal burglary

supplies and paraphernalia, and, for that matter, journalists do not write books about a wild weekend of burglary in Las Vegas, with no legally (or professionally) disastrous consequences. Drugs, though also a serious crime in this time and place, are clearly conceived of very differently. The argument could be made that this analogy is facetious, given that drug *use* can be theorised as, in itself, a victimless crime, but I would argue that this reinforces rather than undercuts my point, since drug offences occupy a place in the system of ideas of crime that is unusual, in that, for reasons I intend to explore more fully, it is (at first glance, at least) the criminals whom the law intends should be protected from their own crimes. Within a framework of conventional Western philosophy and socio-political traditions of personal liberty, the logic of this can perhaps be conceived of as less coherent than laws designed to protect property, persons, or even the interests of the state. The law is under question, within society, and within the Gonzo Text.

The essential arbitrariness of the criminality of drug use, which may be considered as a prominent contested reading of the Text of ‘drugs’ in American culture, is evoked within the text of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. The perception of a kind of unreason at the heart of the contemporary criminal justice system of the US, a recurrent theme in Gonzo, is repeatedly emphasised in the book, as something woven into the fabric of the society that Thompson is attempting to dissect. Thus, turning from the violence of the gambling industry’s debt enforcers to the state’s draconian drug laws isn’t presented as a deviation or change in the subject at hand, but rather as just the examination of more threads of the same tapestry:

Mainline gambling is a very heavy business – and Las Vegas makes Reno seem like your friendly neighbourhood grocery store. For a loser, Vegas is the meanest town on earth. Until last year, there was a giant billboard on the outskirts of Las Vegas, saying:
DON’T GAMBLE WITH MARIJUANA!
IN NEVADA: POSSESSION --- 20 YEARS

SALE --- LIFE! (Thompson, 2005a: 42)

Similarly, comparisons are made between different stories of the law, illustrating an alleged failure of the legal system's moral logic, asserting that the system when considered as a whole, albeit subjectively, can be seen as amoral and/or ridiculous.

In one example, Thompson-the-character, extremely nervous about being apprehended by the police for various crimes against property and also in possession of a considerable stash of highly illegal substances, scans a newspaper and, reading about military deaths from drug overdoses, the routine torture and murder of prisoners in Vietnam (referred to with the racial epithet 'slopes'), an investigation into a pharmacy that was allegedly supplying vast quantities of drugs, and a random mass-shooting, concludes:

Reading the front page made me feel a lot better. Against that heinous background, my crimes were pale and meaningless. I was a relatively respectable citizen – a multiple felon, perhaps, but certainly not dangerous. (Thompson, 2005a: 73-4)

Thompson's narrative voice of the Text is brought up short a moment later, however, by a stern reminder that subjective conceptions of logic, morality and reason are not reliable guides for predicting the actions of the American criminal justice system:

I turned to the sports page and saw a small item about Muhammed Ali; his case was before the Supreme Court, the final appeal. He'd been sentenced to five years in prison for refusing to kill 'slopes'.
'I ain't got nothing against them Viet Congs', he said.
Five Years. (Thompson, 2005a: 74)

The respect for the law which would be required for the internalisation of the legal proscription against dropping acid or smoking weed, simply because the law says not to do it, is discussed in its absence in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. It is implicitly questioned by the work here, in inviting contemplation of a legal system sentencing a man to five years in prison, not for killing people, but for refusing to.

The place of drugs in the interrogation of the idea of crime contained in *Fear in Loathing in Las Vegas* is complicated, but at its heart lies the tension between two ideas. There is the idea that drugs cause the characters to commit criminal acts, in a sense, *making them criminals* through their irresponsible and irrational behaviour while under the influence of substances conventionally categorised as drugs. This is a powerful discourse in contemporary ideas of drugs and of those who make use of them.

As Troy Duster wrote in 1970:

Today, men make an almost complete association of the addict with criminality. When we hear that someone is addicted to drugs, we seldom think of the physiological problem first. Instead, we conceive of an immoral, weak, psychologically inadequate criminal who preys upon an unsuspecting population to supply his 'morbid' appetite. (Duster, 1970: 19)

There is also, however, the possible conclusion, from the wider cultural context of the nightmarish excess, greed and violence of Las Vegas (standing in for and aided by the idea(s) of America), that such effects reproduce in the individual only a comparatively minor and comparatively harmless derangement, if not an actually positive impact, in the altered perception of the socio-cultural environment. Inextricably, a context of a self-justifying sense of dissent, revolutionary and/or individual, is also in play here. This goes beyond the purely personal assertion of individual autonomy with relation to the law, exemplified by Thompson's affirmation that 'I just usually go with my own taste. If I like something, and it happens to be against the law, well, then I might have a problem' (Brinkley, 2000: 266). Perceptions of American imperialism in South-East Asia, and the cultural authorisation of conceiving of the military draft as an unjust law which might ethically be broken (BBC, 2008), as well as similar ethical rejection of racist and sexist laws and repressive social conventions, is related to dissident and/or deviant subcultural groups and activities. In this I refer to the groups and individuals who came to be referred to as the hippie movement, as a shorthand cultural signifier of socio-political dissent.

The transgression of social convention, as with behaviours relating to dress, music, sexual promiscuity etc. comes to be conceived by some as related to the breaking of laws, as with protest, including draft-dodging, and also as with drug-use, whether solitary, or dissidently social⁷. This is because being either within the law or outside it ceases to be perceived as an over-archingly important barrier, within some counter-cultures, in which other codes of behaviour came to dominate social structures. It should be noted, however, that the perceived deviance of a lifestyle should not be considered exclusively as a matter of proactive free choice. The contemporary American sociologist Howard Becker, studying the marginalisation of ‘deviant’ groups such as drug addicts and jazz musicians, observed:

Put more generally, the point is that the treatment of deviants denies them the ordinary means of carrying on the routines of everyday life open to most people. Because of this denial, the deviant must of necessity develop illegitimate routines. The influence of public reaction may be direct, as in the instances considered above [being fired or arrested], or indirect, a consequence of the integrated character of the society in which the deviant lives. (Becker, 1966: 35)

Putting the question of the extent to which this analysis can be applied to the (amorphous) hippie movement, and the general question of the origins of marginal and/or deviant or dissenting subcultures both aside, temporarily, the point here is that what many called wrong, many others came to consider as both right and normal, and, as I’ve said, one area of this popular social and cultural dissent was ‘drug use’. These are among the reasons why, in considering ‘drugs’ in the text of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, the clash of the arguments of both sides of ‘the drug debate’, and the arguments themselves, must be considered carefully. ‘Drugs’ are a Text that must itself be disentangled and placed in a cultural context before it can be understood within readings of the Gonzo Text, and, in particular, of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

⁷ On these social constructions, see for example Thompson’s own examination of ‘the hippies’ in *The ‘Hashbury’ Is the Capital of the Hippies* (Thompson, 1980: 405-417).

For this reason it becomes necessary to consider in greater detail the intellectual arguments and social forces that seek to define drugs in a way that opposes their use being left as a matter of personal choice for the individual. For Becker, there were three ‘values’ which legitimised prohibitionist legislation in America against substances including marijuana, opiates and alcohol (Becker, 1966: 135-6). The first of these was the Protestant Ethic’s emphasis on personal responsibility, explicitly opposing anything causing the loss of self-control. The second was a disapproval of ecstasy sought for its own sake, and there is some evidence from contemporary theorists to suggest that it would be a mistake to underestimate the influence of this proscription against undeserved and otherwise improper joy on the mind-set of prohibitionists:

Most of the hostility that I have met with occurs from people who have never examined the facts at all. I suspect that what makes them dislike cannabis is not the belief that the effects of taking it are harmful, but rather a horrifying suspicion that here is a source of pure pleasure for those who have not earned it, who do not deserve it. (MacIntyre, 1968: 848, cited in Young, 1971: 99)

The third was a humanitarian belief that making drugs and alcohol illegal and therefore inaccessible would help those ‘enslaved’ by the substances to avoid temptation, benefitting both them and their families (Becker, 1966: 135-6).

The ‘victims’ of drugs are argued by some to be a central construction of anti-drug discourse. Dave Boothroyd, in the theoretical underpinning of narco-cultural studies which he undertakes in *Culture on Drugs*, alleges that:

The decision on drugs determines the reality of drug culture and selects ‘drug victims’ (drug addicts and victims of drug crime alike) who are often paraded ceremoniously before the rest of society in the media. At the same time it passes the responsibility for this drama to the drugs themselves. This relationship between drugs and scapegoating can be traced to the conceptualisation of the drug itself. (Boothroyd, 2006: 39)

It is perhaps possible to read Gonzo journalism and its narrator’s outrageous drug-related activities as an almost ritualised subversion of the sacrificial ceremony to which

Boothroyd refers. This is obviously not serendipity, but simply a consequence of the fact that all aspects of the framing of drugs – whether through the most culturally specific American traditions which Becker references, or the most generalised mythic structures which Boothroyd considers – play a part in reading the Text of ‘drugs’ themselves, and thus in reading the Gonzo Text. The drug user is not playing the conventional role of the victim in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and, within that work, drugs do not necessarily play their usual role either – that of the foreign influence. In order to understand the drugs in the work, it is necessary to examine the nature of the cultural entanglement of aspects of the anti-drug discourse. The idea of the ‘foreign influence’ or the ‘foreign substance’ – the nature of drugs as something essentially alien, foreign, other – is one such critical aspect.

Gilbert and Pearson, in considering repressive discourses surrounding drugs in the UK, frame the implications of the ‘personal responsibility’ issue perhaps more critically than Becker, but observe a similar phenomenon in that:

The fact that the anti-drugs discourse is still tied to the continuing hegemony of forms of Puritanism is illustrated by contemporary arguments against ending prohibition. Using drugs, it is argued, saps the user’s will to achieve, and above all their will to work. (Gilbert & Pearson, 1999: 155-6)

Jock Young considered the rhetoric of anti-drug reactions as springing from much the same well-spring of horror at the idea of pleasurable idleness, considered not as leisure, but as dissent against the natural order of honest labour and just reward:

The social reaction against drug use, the aim of which is perceived as purely hedonistic and detrimental to the individual’s productive capacity, is an example of moral indignation involving a condemnation of those who opt out of the notions of deferred gratification, hard work and responsibility implicit in the basic normative rules of Western society. (Young, 1971: 99)

In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, it could be argued that this idea of drugs versus the work ethic is subverted, since it is produced as work, by a professional writer, if not *through* then certainly *on* the drugs. I think, however, that this would be largely

unhelpful, both for reasons discussed in the introduction to my argument regarding the mythically natural presentation of Thompson's writing, and because, to put it more simply, getting paid to take drugs, have fun, and be crazy, cannot fill in as work, in this sense, in this case. Before moving on from talking about drugs and un-work, as one possible source out of many of the power of prohibitionist discourse, it is also perhaps worth taking note of the strength of the idea of the need to labour, not just practically, but ethically, as a not just Puritan, but generically Christian imperative with very deep roots in the structure of Christian society. Here another parallel with Foucault makes itself apparent, in that he notes the key role of such proscriptions against idleness in the progress of the construction of madness (Foucault, 1988: 55-60).

Idleness and the work ethic, particularly in terms of the Christian roots of the constructions of ethics in play here, are, however, only one thread of many to disentangle in the Text of 'drugs' as constituted by prohibitionist discourses. Gilbert and Pearson, unlike Becker, note the presence of enduring traces of chauvinistic and racist forces that influenced the foundations of these discourses:

Cocaine, opiates and cannabis were all banned not because of any serious concern for public health, but because they were associated with the cultures of non-white immigrant communities and of groups of young women enjoying unprecedented (for at least a century) degrees of social, economic and sexual independence. (Gilbert & Pearson, 1999: 155)

And this is not simply a paternalistic case of 'Would you want your wife or foreign neighbour to take this drug?' The drug-user comes to be considered as something inferior to the average citizen, defined as such not by the activity of taking drugs, but by the deficiencies which this activity supposedly identifies:

The undersocialized drugtaker is seen in Freudian terms to have a weak superego, an inadequate ego and – if a man – lack of proper masculine identification. He is, in short, psychopathic. His lack of norms is underlined by the fact that he has a personality which is immature and infantile. (Young, 1971: 53)

There is an underlying suggestion that drugs will make a white man weak and irrational, like a woman or foreigner, dramatising the hegemony that irrationality, laziness (here again we find drugs tangled with not working) and, indeed, intoxicated ecstasy, are generally to be avoided, and also the idea that, to the white man (who is, as usual, standing in for the general case of the human being) these states, and that which induces them, are something *foreign*. In some senses, this unreasoned disapproval of the enjoyment of certain substances, as in fact *morally* wrong, can be traced within ‘medical’ discourses, implicitly supplying ideological underpinning even to rhetorics of treatment of addiction and prevention of ‘abuse’ (Barton, 2003: 60).

The traditional conception of drugs as foreign substances, in the body, in consciousness, and indeed in Western Europe and North America, is a recurring theme in the history of drugs. Ronell, writing on America’s War on Drugs, observes that:

Under the impacted signifier of drugs, America is fighting a war against a number of felt intrusions. They have to do mostly with the drift and contagion of a foreign substance, or of what is revealed as foreign (even if it should be homegrown). (Ronell, 1992: 50)

While Hunter Thompson may recall reports of massive drug use in Vietnam, he does not overly dwell on the idea of drugs’ mythically ‘foreign’ origins, although as Ronell points out, this aspect of the Text of ‘drugs’ is all but unavoidable in American consciousness. Rather, by comically noting their proliferation in California in 1971 – ‘Getting hold of the drugs had been no problem, but the car and the tape recorder were not easy things to round up at 6:30 on a Friday afternoon in Hollywood’ (Thompson, 2005a: 12) – Thompson domesticates them; implicitly labelling them as just another set of readily available consumer goods. Nonetheless the foreign-ness incorporated in the idea of drugs, at that idea’s conception, remains, in the drugs, and in the Text.

In his extremely helpful history of writers on drugs, Marcus Boon observes that in the first recorded book about recreational drug use (in that the value of the drugs is neither medical, nor spiritual, but pleasurable), *Confessions of an English Opium Eater* (De Quincey, 1971 cited in Boon, 2002: 37), opium the ‘drug’ is *introduced*, culturally speaking, as ‘a fabled, mythical substance from the East that could be purchased from any pharmacist in England and would allow transport to the realms of the imagination’. From the outset, the myth of the drug trip, and not just in the case of opium, is entangled in the drug’s mythic status as foreign substance, mysterious both in its foreignness to the body, and in the foreign lands of its origin. This remains true whether the myth is deployed as a warning against ‘the foreign contagion of the poppy’ or as mythic advertising for an exotic, ‘foreign’ delight (Boon, 2002: 37-8). The sense of the glamorously exotic dangers of the foreign substance is also certainly not limited to the 19th century, nor to the mythically Oriental opium poppy. As Boon points out, the sense of a foreignness, embodied in drugs, in some sense polluting both Americans and America herself, can be found at the heart of some of the founding rhetoric of what came to be called the War on Drugs.

In testimony before Congress in 1937 regarding proposed anti-cannabis legislation, the Commissioner of the Federal Narcotics Bureau alleged that the plant in question was both the lotus of Homer’s *Odyssey*, and the drug used to control the original ‘assassins’ of Hassan-ibn-al-Sabbah, and, in so doing, the Commissioner invoked ancient, sinister, and quintessentially *foreign* myths (Boon, 2002: 123). More directly, in the case of cannabis, the decision to classify the plant by its (probably) Spanish name, and play on a public perception of a Mexican and/or criminal connection, was the driving force behind American’s first anti-cannabis laws, enacted at the state level:

These [laws] were mostly driven by the perception that Mexican immigrants fleeing the Mexican revolution of 1910 into Texas and other border states, or

blacks in the southern states, were committing violent crimes under the influence of the drug, which now went by the new name 'marihuana' or 'marijuana' – cannabis' [sic] own sinister double. (Boon, 2002: 156)

This cultural process is confined neither to cannabis nor to the early 20th century, within discourses of drugs. It is a key process in the construction of anti-drug rhetorics, invoking if not irrational then certainly unreasoned revulsion and fear through the use of the myth of the outsider.

This evocation of the loosely defined but still implicitly threatening figure of the outsider is inextricably entangled in the myths surrounding drugs, for it is the sinister foreigner who brings the foreign substances in from the outside, via a mythical association including but not limited to both use and supply. This is why when Boon assesses anti-cannabis discourses in America, the mythic structure to which he refers is so eerily familiar:

Marijuana quickly became a symbol for everything middle-class white America was afraid of; its smell was the smell of crime and poverty, its user either a desirable but corrupt Mexican or black woman or a male criminal, seedy and deranged. (Boon, 2002: 158)

In the 1980s, crack cocaine came to be culturally deployed in much the same mythic association with America's standard 'outsiders', African-Americans and Hispanic-Americans, her two largest ethnic minority populations. It is rare to find a prominent drug text of almost any kind in 20th century American culture that does not include its share of dark skin⁸. This includes the text of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, in which militant Chicano attorney and activist Oscar Zeta Acosta is prominently represented as the drug-using 'Samoan attorney' (Thompson, 1980: 524)⁹.

⁸ On the enduring racism of American constructions of 'drugs', see for example the discussion of misconceptions surrounding crack cocaine in Gwynne (2013).

⁹ Acosta himself authored two books which fictionalised his career as a politically militant Chicano activist, including the formulation of his self-identified 'brown buffalo' status (1989a, 1989b). For further theoretical examination of the connections between Acosta's and Thompson's political and literary careers, see also Wright (2010).

As foreign influence and foreign substance, drugs are conceived of as pollutants, invading a purity of some kind. This sense of the alien nature of drugs is deployed on several levels. Drugs are associated with the foreignness of non-white races, and, in a less direct sense, the foreignness of females, inasmuch as the feminine denotes 'foreign' characteristics including irrationality, weakness, pleasure-seeking and idleness. This foreignness, at the social level, is perceived as intruding on America in general and on cities and communities, while on the individual level the drug as alien substance introduces something 'foreign' to the body and to the mind, intruding on the imagined purity of reason and sobriety. Derrida theorises this anti-drug rhetoric as protecting the individual body for the good of the social body, and of the implicitly anthropomorphised community:

From the prohibitionist, then, we hear of a need to protect society from everything we associate with drug use: irresponsibility, non-work, irrationality, unproductivity, delinquency – either sexual or not – illness and the social costs it entails, and more generally, the very destruction of the *social bond*. But this protection of the social bond, and thus of a certain symbolicity, indeed of rationality in general – this is almost always presented as the protection of a 'natural' normality of the body, of the social body and the body of the individual member. (Derrida, 1995: 243-4)

This conception of drugs, as an alien substance from which to protect the pure body, is a founding, central discourse of drug prohibition, and indeed, of defining drugs as 'drugs'.

This construction of the body as 'naturally' unpolluted by drugs may itself seem a 'natural' aspect of conventional ideas of the human condition, however, as Derrida points out, the concept of the pure or ideal body is a problematic one:

In the name of this organic and originary naturalness of the body we declare and wage the war on drugs, the war against these artificial, pathogenic, and foreign aggressions. Again we find a desire to reconstitute what you just called the 'ideal body', the 'perfect body'. But as you also just pointed out, from the other side of the problem, so to speak (for you see how this opposition remains

problematic), 'products' otherwise considered as dangerous and unnatural are often considered apt for the liberation of the same 'ideal' or 'perfect body' from social oppression, suppression, and repression, or from the reactive violence that reduces originary forces or desire, indeed the 'primary processes'. (Derrida, 1995: 244)

Here Derrida points out that both 'sides' of the drug debate argue from the point of view of a notion of the perfect, natural state of the human body, either corrupted by the poison of drugs or liberated by their power. In either case, however, there is an assumption that the body has an ideal state, or at least the theoretical possibility of an approachable perfection.

In some conventional contemporary discourses of the body, this idea of perfection can perhaps be best considered in terms of three mythical absolutes – those of health, sanity, and sobriety. This is simply to say that in a tradition of the conventional theorisation of the human being, there is a body to be healthy, a mind to be sane, and then a third term, recognising the idea that certain physical substances temporarily disrupt the perfect operation of both body and mind. This is intimately related to the conception of what constitutes a 'valid' or 'true' experience, in question in the Gonzo Text. It is worth noting here that the Hunter Thompson character in Gonzo does not seem to assert that it is uncomplicatedly 'natural' or 'freeing' to be on drugs. The Gonzo conception of drugs could be read as representing the states attained as neither natural nor unnatural in these terms – simply that they are different. Any pro-drug rhetorical force in the Text could be perceived as grounded in a fairly straightforward hedonism – that it is good to have fun and that drugs are fun to be had.

In order to avoid an apparent oversimplification I should note here in passing, however, an idea to be explored more fully in the next chapter, that this fun is not without an implicit element of risk. While the criminality of drug use is criticised in Gonzo, not

unlike the hypocritical, repressive treatment of non-conformity generally, the deviance and the risk are presented on some levels as part of the fun. It has been argued by Hunt, Moloney and Evans (2009) in their examination of scholarship on drug-taking in rave culture, that this is an aspect of the nature of drug use which is often neglected by conventional cultural studies approaches. Thompson underscores the blending of the appeals of risk and drug-use with reference to the idea of edge-work (itself an important and complicated concept, which is also explored further in the next chapter):

It was treacherous, stupid and demented in every way – but there was no avoiding the stench of twisted humour that hovered around the idea of a gonzo journalist in the grip of a potentially terminal drug episode being invited to cover the National District Attorneys’ Conference on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs ... It was dangerous lunacy, but it was also the kind of thing a real connoisseur of edge-work could make an argument for. (Thompson, 2005a: 80)

Drugs are not without their dangers – far from it – but they possess ‘a certain bent appeal’ (Thompson, 2005a: 80), like crashing a law-enforcement event convened to put people like yourself in jail, and there is a case presented within the Text for their value as fun, pleasure and/or amusement.

This is a problematic position in relation to ideas of journalism, even of literary journalism. The concepts of health, sanity and sobriety, without objective existence and measured against an ostensibly democratically determined ‘normalcy’, underpin a myriad of hegemonic subject positions in American society; for example those of the good citizen, the productive member of society, the professional and, by extension, the good, objective journalist. To fall short of these standards, in ‘losing touch with reality’ through drugs, is in some senses to fall outside the social order. The bond to which Derrida referred is weakened by any such tainted individual, and the purity of the society itself is polluted. Here again, drugs are like madness, ‘which is the moment of pure subjectivity’ (Foucault, 1988: 175) and a practitioner of subjectivity, like Hunter Thompson, could be viewed as invading the purity of journalistic practice. It is worth

noting that the text of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* has been read in this sense as performing an albeit somewhat self-critical attack on journalism itself: 'A hatred of journalists and journalism burns deep in the new books as well, though it must be self-hatred to a considerable degree' (Woods, 1972). This critique, (which will be engaged with as a theme of the Gonzo Text more fully in Chapter Two,) may be read in both direct criticisms of journalism within the text, and in the operation of the Text as a subjective alternative, demonstrating the limitations of ostensibly objective journalistic practice.

In this sense, not being objective represents a transgression here, in that Thompson's journalistic subjectivity can perhaps take the place of madness in Foucault's assertion that 'Being both error and sin, madness is simultaneously impurity and solitude; it is withdrawn from the world, and from truth' (Foucault, 1988: 175). There is more than simply professional failure in the lack of being what is expected; there is an accompanying guilt, a stigma, a label of revulsion for one who is not experiencing the world in the manner in which one is supposed to (see for example, Duster, 1970: 154). The manifestation of this in the mythic microcosm of 'journalism' under consideration is the strict assertion that *only* a healthy, sane and sober body is capable of experiencing that which is to be reported without any individual imperfections of self tainting the production of the 'true representation' that is the paradoxical goal of objective journalism.

It is interesting to note that the critique of objective journalism in a sense 'performed' by Thompson-as-character within *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is not limited to his drugged, radical subjectivity, and its failure to embody 'the objective journalist'. Other problems with this myth are also implied in the failure of the story to be reported to live

up to its part of the bargain by being objectively knowable, and thus reportable. Thompson arrives in Las Vegas officially on assignment to cover the Mint 400, a desert race for bikes and dune buggies; a sporting event that should, it would seem, be as objectively real a story as anything can be, and yet, looking toward the end of the pits, when only half the riders have started, he notes, in his ostensible ‘coverage’:

Beyond that point the incredible dustcloud that would hang over this part of the desert for the next two days was already formed up solid. None of us realized, at the time, that this was the last we would see of the ‘Fabulous Mint 400’ – ... The idea of trying to ‘cover the race’ in any conventional press-sense was absurd: It was like trying to keep track of a swimming meet in an Olympic-sized pool filled with talcum powder instead of water. (Thompson, 2005a: 38)

Thompson-the-character gives up and continues drinking, but it is perhaps possible to discern something of a parable about the fundamental impossibility of objective journalism in this episode, without reference to any qualities the practitioner may or not possess, including sanity, health and sobriety¹⁰. In the general case, buying into the usual assumptions of the objectively reportable event which has not been obscured by too much dust, the hypothetical human being who embodies these imaginary perfections is, ultimately, what the idea of objective journalism logically calls for. Perfection of these attributes is a prerequisite for the (impossible) absolute absence of subjectivity in perception or representation of experience. The expectation is, after all, that the journalist be *perfectly* objective.

A Living Human Body

The body of the writer, implicitly involved in conceiving of these attributes, is itself always in question in the Text. By introducing an uncertain imperfection into the functioning of the body, and of the mind inhabiting it, drugs emphasise and complicate

¹⁰ For a reading of this scene which reaches similar conclusions about this unreportable race’s acting as a metaphor for the limits of conventional journalism, see Alexander (2012: 21).

the place of that intangible body's entanglement in the Text, and not just by being the site where the drugs get in and make the writer see bats. Barthes theorised the cultural existence of the writer's body, in terms of bourgeois cultural sensibilities, in his examination of the myth he called *The Writer on Holiday*. In examining the mythology of the writer who is publicly depicted 'at rest', Barthes notes that:

What proves the wonderful singularity of the writer, is that during the holiday in question, which he takes alongside factory workers and shop assistants, he unlike them does not stop, if not actually working, at least producing. So that he is a false worker, and a false holiday-maker as well ... Firstly, this treats literary production as a sort of involuntary secretion, which is taboo, since it escapes human determinations ... The second advantage of this logorrhea is that, thanks to its peremptory character, it is quite naturally regarded as the very essence of the writer. (Barthes, 1973: 30)

Hunter Thompson's trip to Las Vegas could be profitably compared to the hypothetical *Le Figaro* piece profiling the writer on holiday, which Barthes here dissects, in terms of the nature of the conception of the writer's *work* as an activity, premised perhaps on the conception of a personal existence for the writer which is assumed to be ordinary and, thus, unrelated to the extraordinary nature of that mental work, at least until proven otherwise. Barthes, however, builds on this point in order to postulate a construction of the place of the writer's ordinary, prosaic *body* in this system of myth, which is even more directly helpful for present purposes.

Considering the mundane, bodily details presented to the public in such representations of writers, Barthes notes that the idea of the body of the writer is related, mythically, to the mystique of the writer within culture:

To endow the writer publicly with a good fleshly body, to reveal that he likes dry white wine and underdone steak, is to make even more miraculous for me, and of a more divine essence, the products of his art. Far from the details of his daily life bringing nearer to me the nature of his inspiration and making it clearer, it is the whole mythical singularity of his condition which the writer emphasizes by such confidences. (Barthes, 1973: 31)

This conception of the writer's existence as a cultural object entangled in the Text can itself be seen as a site where the pollution of the writer's body can, mythically, enter the Text, as for example when the work itself is, or purports to be, the 'details of his daily life' and his profile illuminates his liking, not of wine or steak, but of LSD, mescaline, ether and the rest. These bodily details are not incidental features of the phantom, implicit writer, but are the conditions of possibility of the Authorship of the Text itself, and their instability is carried along the same cultural, Textual channels carved into the ideas of the writer, and her place in society, and in culture, in relation to the Text.

It is important to note that this evocation of the quasi-spectral Authorial body, as drugged – in a sense as drug-polluted – embodies within the Text a specific kind of transgression against rules which themselves are afforded a status of, in a sense, primary instruments of discipline, social cohesion and control. By this I mean that this transgression, manifest within the body, breaks rules of modern society which can be considered as fundamental, in the sense that the law starts with the body – it is from that relationship of authority with flesh that a certain structure of (quasi-)legal authority itself emanates. Mowitt summarises the body of scholarship on which I am drawing here when he observes that:

By insisting that morality produces the need for punishment, Nietzsche set up Foucault's intervention, which, as is well known, sees the body itself as the product of corporal punishment. Thus, in the penal colony – as Kafka glimpsed – the surface on which the law writes its authority is the very body rendered thinkable by such writing. The body hemmed to the law, as the Marquis de Sade understood, is only a particular incarnation of the body, though one that is repudiated, even today (consider, for example, the hackles raised in certain quarters by piercing and tattooing), at the risk of committing a moral infraction. (Mowitt, 2002: 111-2)

Obviously, the relationship of the body to the law is always in play when 'drugs' are involved, and issues of freedom and pleasure bound up in the constitution of the subject are always under tension. These are, it is worth noting, some of the aspects of the work

which have been read as maintaining its relevance to modern audiences, beyond its utility as a document of a specific socio-historical environment:

Not merely, as it is often treated, a snapshot of its time, static in its representations and useful to contemporary audiences only to the extent that its social moment mirrors our own, Thompson's novel offers an early sketch of complex issues of citizenship and law that continue to shape our world today. (Vredenburg, 2013: 170)

The politics of the body, of the citizen, and of the legal dimensions of those constructions, is interrogated within *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. This interrogation is a prominent aspect of the Text, and drugs play a prominent role within it.

To borrow the phrasing of one more of the many thinkers to have tried to discern and formulate the questions which arise from these uncertainties: 'It wasn't clear then: was the body private property or not, could the authorities legislate zoning ordinances, or were pleasure and liberty values freely exercised upon a coded body?' (Ronell, 1992: 75) The body of Thompson-the-Author, as evoked within the Gonzo Text, is not simply transgressive in a Textual sense by virtue of the peculiar nature of its presence. It is also, beneath that, by virtue of being a body which *is* 'criminal', an embodiment *of* transgression. The different levels on which the 'pollution', enabled by the idea of the 'drugs', are enacted, are both mutually entangled and mutually reinforcing, the whole of the transgression being greater than the sum of its parts.

The foreign substances Hunter Thompson the character takes, and which thus infiltrate his body, and the experiences which are depicted in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, emphasise that this work is coming from the writer's body, as well as his mind, in fact in some ways performing the instability of the conventional distinction between the two. The instability of this distinction is, of course, much discussed in both philosophy

and science, and Sadie Plant, in examining the relationship between drugs and writing, frames the issue scientifically, in terms of the chemicals known to be at work in the processes of consciousness, emotion, and indeed in all the physical processes of the human form:

The multifunctionality of so many of these chemicals, their ability to work both as neurotransmitters and hormones, suggests that it is difficult to draw the line between processes at work in the brain and those in the rest of the body. The obvious dividing line is the blood-brain barrier, the cellular coating that prevents many substances that are carried or absorbed by the bloodstream from getting into the working of the brain, but even this is by no means an absolute divide. (Plant, 1999: 178-9)

Drugs are something that happen to the body, but affect the mind and the body together. In this sense they illuminate the sometimes neglected concept that the body and the mind are one integrated system, in which the mind is not necessarily as securely in charge of its own orderly operation as some philosophies find it reassuring and expedient to believe. This perhaps can be seen as mirroring, in a sense, the way madness once troubled Christian philosophy by illuminating problems with ‘the totality of soul and body’, leading to the appearance of ‘the Unreal’ (Foucault, 1988: 93). This point should, however, be taken as parenthetical, since it is not my intention to belabour my point about the apparent parallels between drugs and madness, not just as alternatives to sane, healthy sobriety, but as reason’s culturally constructed ‘Others’.

Because the drugs, however, alter but do not obliterate the senses of reality and of the self within Thompson’s Gonzo Text in general, and almost continuously in the specific example of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, the general question of drugs here is one of considering their effects. In wondering where and how the drug experiences affect the Text, the reader asks first when and how the drugs affect the Hunter Thompson encountered within it. I am not intending to attempt an in-depth consideration of the neurochemistry of the so-called psychoactive substances in question – it is not my area

of expertise, and it is beyond the scope of this inquiry – however, the shortcomings of a conventional theorisation of drugs, as foreign poisons in the body which then affect the mind, place unhelpful limitations on the consideration of drugs within cultural Texts such as Gonzo journalism. The nature of these theoretical limitations is analogous to the distance between a hegemonic understanding of drugs as dangerous alien substances, and a neurochemically-grounded construction of the activity of drugs which theorises the physical form of the human being in a different way.

A neurochemical avenue of approach to philosophising ‘drugs’ destabilises not just the mind/body distinction, but the distinction between ‘natural’ and ‘un-natural’ substances which itself underpins the construction of ‘drugs’ as a distinct category. To borrow Plant’s summary of this conceptualisation of drugs:

By the 1970s neurochemical research began to reveal the whole human nervous system as a living laboratory, a vast system of chemical processes continually engaged in the manufacture, synthesis and distribution of a vast range of its own means of chemical communication and regulation. It is now well known that the activities of these chemicals are closely related to experiences of extreme pleasure, euphoria, depression, the body’s ability to respond to pain and stress, arousal and excitement, the workings of the memory and indeed all the body’s normal and extreme processes, activities and states. And these are the chemical activities that can be interrupted, waylaid, blocked or excited by the introduction of psychoactive drugs. All the psychoactive drugs contain specific chemicals that allow them to pass as the brain’s own neurotransmitters, mimicking their chemical structures and behaviours so well that the brain’s receptors accept them as its own. (Plant, 1999: 179)

‘Drugs’ act as ‘drugs’, in the myriad chemical interventions lumped together as psychoactivity, precisely because they are not, in a chemical sense, foreign substances, in that they do not in fact introduce chemical processes and components into the body which are truly alien to the body’s ‘living laboratory’ – one example being the chemical (and linguistic) kinship between the opiate morphine and endogenous morphines, neurotransmitters also known, popularly, as endorphins.

Other, relatively recent work on the intersection of drugs and literature draws similar conclusions to Plant's on this point. Ronell notes that drugs 'are animated by an outside already inside' (Ronell, 1992: 29) in that 'Much like the paradigms installed by endorphins, Being-on-drugs indicates that a structure is already in place, prior to the production of the materiality that we call drugs, including virtual reality or cyberprojections' (Ronell, 1992: 33). Theories have even been advanced suggesting internal biosynthesis of psychedelic 'drugs', and these theories are referenced, after a fashion, within *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. In an examination of American drug culture, Robert Anton Wilson writes that:

'A contemporary theory, developed by Dr. Robert DeRopp, Dr. Humphrey Osmond, Dr. Abraham Hoffer and others, holds that the great mystics – and some varieties of psychotics, or persons diagnosed as psychotic – are manufacturing the equivalent of a psychedelic drug in their own glands ... This substance, also called adrenochrome, bears a distinct chemical resemblance to LSD and, even more, to mescaline, the active drug in the peyote cactus'. (Wilson, 1987: 128)

Although adrenochrome is not synthesised in the glands of any character in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, it does make an appearance, and the source of the adrenochrome which Thompson-the-character ingests before embarking on a vivid drug trip is cited as 'The adrenaline glands from a *living* human body', supposedly the drug's only source (Thompson, 2005a: 132). The point I (and perhaps Thompson) am trying to make about human receptivity to drugs is underscored, perhaps even performed, here in the Text, since it is an obvious absurdity to consider something produced by the human body a substance foreign to it in that sense, even if you're using someone else's glands to make it. I have been unable to find any evidence that extracting adrenochrome from a human subject is objectively possible, incidentally, but objectivity here is, obviously, beside the point.

In terms of approaching the question of how to conceptualise the relationship between ‘drugs’ and the human chemistry set, I believe that the concept of receptivity, which I propose to define here, can be helpful in constructing an answer, though I stress again that I am not claiming an expertise in neuroscience, or even biology. My interest in, and understanding of, the place of receptors in human physiology is limited to the cultural existence of the idea of receptors, and the ways in which that idea can be seen to have affected common understanding of the functioning of the human machine. The history of this concept can be seen to proceed from the proposal of ‘receptive substance’ as an explanation of pharmacological effects in 1905 (Rang, 2006: S9-10) through the concept’s refinement and, most importantly for my purposes here, popularisation well beyond the pharmacological and scientific communities. The reason why I include this lengthy pseudo-scientific digression is that there are consequences for a narco-cultural studies approach to a Text, implicit in the fact that ‘drugs’, in order to interfere in the chemical processes of the mind’s apprehension of reality, and the self – in order, in fact, to *be* ‘drugs’ – must be chemicals to which those chemical processes have what might be referred to as a receptivity.

What I mean by this is that rather than introducing a substance or process that is alien to the body’s laboratory, drugs can be understood as simply altering the levels, and actions, of the chemicals which, already present, regulate and indeed, constitute, the chemical processes of human life, and of consciousness. Examples, as far as the actions of these drugs are at present understood, include LSD’s disruption of the action of serotonin, amphetamines’ stimulation of the release of dopamine, cocaine’s interference with dopamine re-uptake (Plant, 1999: 180) and on and on, through drugs hard and soft, as well as medicines such as the selective serotonin re-uptake inhibitor Prozac, Ritalin, and much of the rest of the modern psycho-pharmacopeia. To use a technological

analogy, the body has receptivities for these substances, but not for, say, the ingestion of a small coin (something that is truly alien to the body, and to which the body does not react in any complex way) in the way that a DVD player can play a pirated DVD, but it can't play a book. The system is not complexly affected by that which is truly alien to it. So it is with drugs. They are close relatives of the chemicals that make up the human process. They slip into the mix, in a sense, naturally.

This is not to say that I am falling into Derrida's trap of considering drugs as a path to the natural, ideal body (Derrida, 1995: 244). The ideal body is an idea to be deployed ideologically, without any basis in reality (subjective or otherwise), and is on drugs, or not, depending finally on how it is imagined. It has even been suggested that modern anti-depressants which are thought to correct neurochemical imbalances in the brain may in fact create abnormal brain states rather than 'curing' them, but abnormal brain states which are considered preferable to the brain's 'natural' functioning (Moncrieff & Cohen, 2006). If it is 'natural' to be 'mentally ill' then the status of the natural, ideal body is thrown into question just as certainly as the status of the 'medicine' itself, more than ever an undecidable pharmakon. The question of whether or not the use of 'drugs' is natural is, ultimately, an unhelpful avenue of approach. Some scientific discourses hold that:

Drug use and addiction seem to have been a part of mammalian society since ancient times. Researchers have evidence and reason to believe that the evolution of mammalian brains and psychotropic plants might be related to each other, connected by ancient drug use. (Saah, 2005: Sect. 7)

Using such ideas to argue the 'natural'-ness of drug use is, however, as Derrida pointed out, to fall into a trap of over-simplifying and mis-framing the question in a manner which is ultimately just as intellectually fruitless as some misguided appeal to the impossible ideal of life without 'pollutants' of any kind.

The War on Drugs can perhaps be considered as unwinnable, by either side, because it presupposes misunderstandings of the issues involved. The Global Commission on Drug Policies itself has all but conceded that the flawed constitution of prohibitionist discourses is a primary cause of the failure of the War on Drugs (Global Commission on Drug Policies, 2011). Receptivity, as an avenue of approach, undercuts the question of the rightness or wrongness of ‘drugs’, which is, ultimately, the issue which is being referred to judgement in relation to the ‘natural’ state of the ideal body, whatever it may be. The question becomes, instead, a matter of constructing ideas of the effects of drugs without final recourse to such myths. The point, without moral implication, is simply that it is not the foreignness of drugs that facilitates their subjective effects – it is the opposite, their chemical *familiarity* as it were. This conception of drugs, not as pollutants but rather in terms of the human system’s receptivity to them, may be considered as having far-reaching implications for possible readings of the intrusions of the un-foreign Text of ‘drugs’ into culture.

Hallucinations Are Bad Enough

To illustrate and apply my point, let us return to the drugs in the text (and Text) of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. When, on acid, amyl nitrate and other chemicals – which is to say, with them interacting with the chemical, human system – Thompson-the-character tries to check in at the Mint Hotel, the drugs once again take hold while he is interacting with the desk clerk:

The woman’s face was *changing*: swelling, pulsing ... horrible green jowls and fangs jutting out, the face of a Moray Eel! Deadly poison! ... We struggled through the crowded lobby and found two stools at the bar ... Terrible things were happening all around us. Right next to me a huge reptile was gnawing on a woman’s neck, the carpet was a blood-soaked sponge – impossible to walk on it, no footing at all. ‘Order some golf shoes’, I whispered. (Thompson, 2005a: 24)

What is the meaning of the representation of this subjective experience, which we might term a hallucination? In answering this, it must be remembered that hallucinations are, as a concept, always a pressing problem for the classification of (represented) experience. Like dreams or madness, they are permitted within the category of experiences, but they are neither things which have been experienced in the real world, nor things which, though represented, have not been experienced (as with 'pure' fiction). Hallucinations are experiences, but not 'real' experiences, and in our culture, what we class as real experiences are raised up above other kinds of experiences, which are in turn held in a kind of subtle, or not, contempt, as of questionable validity and value since, after all, they aren't 'real'.

The question of how to classify and in a sense 'judge' hallucinations remains a problem in the theorising of experience. As Boothroyd points out:

On the face of it there is hardly anything more urgent for a philosophical project than to secure the distinction between the real and the unreal, between dream and wakefulness, sense and nonsense ... Hallucination is thus a form of consciousness which could be said to mark a specific limit of philosophical inquiry in general. (Boothroyd, 2006: 138)

As I have said, sobriety and its absence constitute a necessary though uncertain term in the classification of experience, needed in order to encompass the subjective experience of all chemical intoxication, of which hallucination, as a state and as an experience, is an extreme, dramatic example. Hallucinations mark a perceived departure from reality, and yet that concept itself is unstable. What reality are we talking about here? Or, to put it differently, from the point of view of the primacy of subjective experience, *whose* reality?

Here in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, checking into the Mint Hotel, Hunter Thompson is representing the experience of being in a hotel lobby, dealing with hotel

staff and the occupants of the bar. Reality is distorted and subjective, but that is always true of literature to some extent, and, indeed, of journalism of every stripe. Nonetheless, these ostensibly distorted experiences are framed in the pseudo-objective reality, internal to the Text and thus rendered subjective, of the ‘real’ hotel, as an experienced environment. The hallucinations do not overwhelm the subjective sense of that reality; they are incorporated into it. As Barber notes of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, ‘In this work, Thompson’s ability to place himself at the centre of chaotic mimesis and remain lucid allows him to commentate with wit and authority on the darker side of desire’ (Barber, 2010: 13). While this is not necessarily how I would summarise the content of the work’s commentary, I would agree that the sense of Thompson’s remaining ‘lucid’ within the chaotic mimesis of the Text is in a sense essential to the Text’s operation. The real and the unreal are blended, as are the ostensibly drug-based and ‘natural’ elements of Thompson’s experiences of them – consider the blend of reason and un-reason in perceiving the floor of a Las Vegas hotel to be too slippery with blood from giant-lizard carnage to walk on, and responding to it with the quasi-rational, lucidly consumerist logic of ordering golf shoes.

In a sense, this pollution of reality, by elements which are not themselves alien to subjective experience but to which experience is, rather, in the sense previously formulated, receptive, undercuts what Derrida and others have noted to be the primary charge against ‘drugs’ and their effects:

What do we hold against the drug addict? Something we never, at least never to the same degree, hold against the alcoholic or the smoker: that he cuts himself off from the world, in exile from reality, far from objective reality and the real life of the city and the community; that he escapes into a world of simulacrum and fiction. He is reproached for his taste for something like hallucinations. No doubt, we should have to make some distinction between so-called hallucinogens and other drugs, but this distinction is wiped out in the rhetoric of fantasy that is at the root of the interdiction: drugs, it is said, make one lose any sense of true reality. (Derrida, 1995: 235-6)

And yet contact with reality is not necessarily obliterated by drugs. This is true from inside the hallucination, and also in a sense from outside, in thinking through the incorporation of the idea of ‘drugs’ into culture, in that the conventional wisdom that drugs make the user lose contact with reality is an oversimplification even of observed effects.

As Wilson noted in a discussion of popular misconceptions about drugs, roughly contemporaneous with Thompson’s work:

It is not at all true, for example, that the average pot smoker or acidhead has lost the ability to distinguish an obvious hallucination from an inescapable reality ... This is worth emphasising because a popular misunderstanding has it that ‘drug cultists’ have lost all critical judgement and believe in all sorts of illusions and hallucinations that they experience on their weed and their acid. (Wilson, 1987: 34-5)

Thompson’s alarm at the monstrous lizards aside, it is worth noting that generally speaking, in examining the concept of ‘drug experiences’, it is a mistake to assume that even the user automatically and uncomplicatedly assigns hallucinations the status of ‘truth’ (which might in this case, for example, have prompted Thompson-the-character to attempt to flee the lizards even without golf shoes). Here, again, things are more complex, and less stable.

The experience of hallucinations is made up of the same substance as other experience, and even the specific nature of its difference can be hard to define, from various perspectives. Just as the chemicals are not alien, and do not constitute or carry a contamination from some neurochemical ‘outside’, so the subjective experience of drugs does not include anything truly alien to experience, which would be beyond, if not experiential possibility, certainly the reach of mimesis. Just as, for psychoanalysis, what is introjected must in a sense have something of the ego projected onto it, in a sense presupposing some type of interiority as a condition of the *recognition* of an

object's exteriority (Hall, 2002: 101-3), so it is with a supposed exterior of the totality of experience – what is alien is *recognised* as alien, throwing its alien nature in some sense into question. To reduce this point to apparent tautology, nothing that isn't experience can be experienced. The exploitation of the admittedly problematic possibility of the communication of drug experience – culture's receptivity to just another Text, another tangle of subjectivity and communicable meaning – implicitly affirms that drug experiences, understood as experience, are not truly foreign to the system. In this, they are just like the drugs.

In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* such an approach to drug experience, as not truly different in kind from other experiences, in this way, can be seen as being reinforced not just by the idea of the drugs in the book, but also by the presentation of the city of Las Vegas. In analysing Sixties culture, DeKoven has noted the prominence of this symbol, in that: 'Las Vegas is a key location, both literally and symbolically of postmodern American culture' (DeKoven, 2004: 72). The city is artificial and fantastic and vulgar and incomprehensible, and can be read as a key symbol within the Text: 'Subtitled "A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream", Thompson's narrative presumes our acceptance of Las Vegas as a symbolic city' (Cooper, 1992: 540). Some critics have gone so far as to frame the work to some extent as 'a scathing critique of the sixties and of foundational American mythology' (Banco, 2008: 159-160), considered in some senses as the defeat of drugs, and other aspects of subversion and dissidence, by the power of the ignorant and corrupt American mainstream, represented by Las Vegas itself:

Thompson invests drug representation with a pathological extremity that mocks not only mainstream pursuit of the American Dream but also undermines its purported antidote: the countercultural dreams of the sixties. The subversiveness of drugs and hippie idealism is no match for the monolithic cultural wasteland of middle-American tourism. (Banco, 2008: 165)

While there is a discernable clash of ideology, however, it is important to note the emphasis the text places on the complex interaction between the experience of ‘the drugs’ and the also overwhelming experience of the spectacle of Las Vegas. In terms of some imagined reasonable, rational place called America, with sane, sober, healthy inhabitants, Thompson and the city, in a sense, meet each other half-way; he is drugged, but the place is, as he puts it, twisted, almost to the point of psychedelia.

Consider Thompson-the-character’s response to a novelty booth offering to reproduce a customer’s likeness, two hundred feet high, with voice message, above the city:

Hallucinations are bad enough ... But *nobody* can handle that other trip – the possibility that any freak with \$1.98 can walk into the Circus-Circus and suddenly appear in the sky over downtown Las Vegas twelve times the size of God, howling anything that comes into his head. No, this is not a good town for psychedelic drugs. Reality itself is too twisted. (Thompson, 2005a: 47)

The assertion by Thompson of incompatibility between the psychedelics and Las Vegas, since reality can (or at least should) be pushed only so far, implicitly makes a case for a different conception of experience and its classification. Las Vegas is as real a place as acid hallucinations are real experiences. From a viewpoint which embraces the subjective nature of human life, experience is, ultimately, experience. Period. And in any case, the effort to appeal to some external scale in order to be able, through reasoned judgement, to separate out the subjective from the objective, the real from the unreal, the drugged from the sober, is ultimately futile, not because one can’t tell, but because the operation results in the first place from framing the matter of human experience in an unhelpfully limited way, prompting the wrong questions.

Boon’s reading of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* highlights its place in the literature of drugs and drug experience in terms of an assertion that drugs demonstrate that such conventional conceptions of experience, founded on concepts of the natural, the sober,

the real, and the like, attempt an ultimately futile expulsion of the subjectively uncertain from the imagined arena of human experience:

Thompson's point was a fundamental one, but had not been made in the context of drugs before. The neon-saturated night of Las Vegas is just as much a hallucination, a myth, a product of the imagination, as any vision triggered by LSD, and drug users themselves swiftly became figures in the American imagination, as intensely fabricated an imaginal realm as any other. (Boon, 2002: 265-6)

The drug user belongs in the nation the way the drug molecule belongs in the receptor and, more importantly, the way the drug experience belongs in the memory, and thus, in culture. This receptivity is present at all levels, from the level of experience, which I have been discussing, through individuals who are labelled as drug-users but who are nonetheless a part of society (and here I refer to the implications of the receptivity model, not simply to the clichés of self-satisfied, 'compassionate' social inclusiveness) through to 'drugs' as cultural substance. Culture is as receptive to drug culture as opioid receptors are to opiate molecules.

The absurd joke of foreignness, of intrinsic separateness, is highlighted at every level in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Such receptivities are enacted by Gonzo's place in literature in the first place, and within the book, to pick a comical example, by the way in which Thompson's character and the Samoan attorney are able to blend in and 'belong' at the National District Attorneys' Convention on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, by wearing misleading name tags: 'Mine said I was a 'private investigator' from L.A. – which was true, in a sense; and my attorney's name-tag identified him as an expert in 'Criminal Drug Analysis'. Which was also true, in a sense' (Thompson, 2005a: 141). Alexander even reads the transition from covering the Mint 400 to infiltrating this convention as signalling a shift from journalism to Gonzo journalism; in the sense we have been dealing with, from identification to undecidability: 'Although he retains the alias Raoul Duke, his enthusiastic response to the second assignment

signals a shift from the alienated status of the conventional reporter to the more integrated subjectivity of the Gonzo journalist' (Alexander, 2012: 24). Beneath these manifestations of theoretical undecidability, directly reported incidents such as Thompson-the-character and the Samoan slipping into the convention, in which the conventionally alien infiltrates the conceptually sacrosanct, relate directly to the bedrock construction of the idea of 'drugs' as foreign other, when the relationship of the substances in question to the nature of experience is so much more complex. (Reducing the pharmakon to the poison, and nothing more, is unhelpful.)

After all, in a very real sense, all experience is drug experience. Consciousness is chemical, and attempting to isolate the 'natural' from the 'unnatural' in the chemistry of the self is futile. Without an external, objective frame of reference (which is, if not outright impossible, certainly inaccessible) asking any version of the question 'What is the natural/valid/sober/real/true nature of this experience/state/reality?' is like trying to ascertain the 'natural' temperature of your thermometer. Asserting the instability and fallibility of the democratic assurances of 'normalcy' – that the proof of what is natural, and real, is the evidence of majority assent (destabilised with ease: as when two people are alone together and one of them can see a swarm of bats) – there is no scale against which to measure the subjective experience of reality.

In considering deconstruction and drugs, Boothroyd notes that normality, not as a frame of reference but in its very existence as a concept, is under attack from this instability:

Certainly, the arbitrariness of the normality in which the rational mind was at home with itself is exposed on the basis of the *destruction* of its regular order. But Unreason or madness, as such, only reflects normality, being made up of its elements. Deconstruction pushes beyond this truth to recover the sense in which the grievously intoxicated mind is no longer *wholly native* nor yet *wholly alien*. (Boothroyd, 2000: 62)

Even without emphasising the recognition that the rational mind and its grievously intoxicated twin cannot be rendered into stable categories, the subjective experience of drugs, which cannot be separated from any conception of the ‘drugged’ mind, illuminates other problems with trying to create stable categories of experience. Ideas of what is ‘native’ or ‘alien’, amongst others, implicitly presuppose the possibility of an objective judgement of what are, after all, subjective categories, albeit with unearned pretensions of objectivity. This is, I must stress, not to say that such an objectivity is needed, but rather that it is because this objective benchmark of a non-subjective reality cannot be brought to bear on subjective experience, that the question itself becomes, or, more precisely, always was, ultimately unhelpful (which is not to say ‘meaningless’, which might seem an objective judgement).

Drug experiences can be considered as primarily related to and contingent upon, drug consumption, which may be seen as complicating the relationship between experience and ‘reality’. The decision to jump from there to the denigration or invalidation of such experience, however, on the basis of the supposed ‘pollution’ of an incomprehensibly complex system which might be called ‘the processing of subjective reality’, or ‘experience’ for short, is unhelpful, and not warranted by the nature of the concept called ‘drugs’, as it is currently constituted. This type of thinking leads to attempts to create new, unstable categories and processes of classification for experiences, as part of a ‘rational’, ‘objective’ project that writers on drugs and drug-culture have long argued to be, *prima facie*, a futile effort, founded in sophistry:

The best that such people can do to rebut the obvious facts is to make a highly artificial distinction between experience and impression. If the hashish user says that he saw brighter colours, they correct this to ‘he imagined brighter colours’; should he say that his sense of touch was more acute, they will write that ‘he imagined his sense of touch was more acute’; if he experiences a cosmic vision, they become especially arch and tell us ‘he imagined he was having all sorts of mystical insights’. ... In ordinary language and by ordinary philosophy there is

no such distinction between one's experience and one's impression of that experience. (Wilson, 1987: 131)

As Wilson argues, and as Thompson's Gonzo Text manifests, so-called rationality cannot defeat, contain, or even separate out the radical subjectivity which the drug experience embodies, and that subjectivity destabilises the conventional structures for conceptualising and categorising the idea of 'experience'. Thus, in glib essence, the idea of the unreal is not 'real', but in this it is not different in kind from the idea of the 'real'. There is only the human receptivity to experience, from inside and from outside. As Boothroyd eloquently notes, 'we are chemistry' and 'drugs are us' (Boothroyd, 2011). There is only the drug trip called consciousness, and the problematic possibilities of mimesis, communication, and thus of culture, still exist only within it. There is nothing outside the drugs.

Chapter Two - Unprofessional Journalism & Edgework: On the Campaign Trail '72

Anybody who thinks that 'it doesn't matter who's President' has never been Drafted and sent off to fight and die in a vicious, stupid War on the other side of the World – or been beaten and gassed by Police for trespassing on public property – or been hounded by the IRS for purely political reasons – or locked up in Cook County Jail with a broken nose and no phone access and twelve perverts wanting to stomp your ass in the shower. That is when it matters who is President or Governor or Police Chief. That is when you will wish you had voted. (Thompson, 2005b: 244)

So much for Objective Journalism. Don't bother to look for it 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, 1983:48)

The nature of Gonzo journalism, and its complex relationship with ideologies of objective journalism, is further complicated in some respects by the nature of discourses around the political sphere. One of the most prominent problems for theorising political journalism is, of course, that of 'bias'. Subjectivity, under its criminal alias, 'bias', is taboo in serious political discourse. This is not an absolute law, but it is the general rule of the conventional practices of traditional journalism. The doctrine of journalistic objectivity is ostensibly the key, the only protection from the political bias, untruth and unfairness which will distort public perceptions and subvert democracy. The central problem of journalism – that of the objective representation of subjective reality – is thrown into sharp, theoretical relief by the problem of covering, for example, a Presidential election, because, as the cliché has it, politics *is* perception. How is an election campaign to be presented without recourse to subjectivity and opinion? The election itself will have an official result, but the process of the campaign boils down to (usually) two candidates fighting over the perceptions and opinions of the electorate. How is the progress of such a struggle to be covered objectively, professionally & honestly?

The main focus of this chapter will be consideration of the Gonzo election coverage collected in *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, with particular reference to the standards, and difficulties, of objectivity in political reporting. Because of this focus, one of the first things that must be considered is the book's cultural context as political journalism. What was non-Gonzo political journalism like at the time? Writing about the workings of mainstream journalism during the coverage of the 1972 election, *Rolling Stone* reporter Timothy Crouse summed up the dominant ideology:

The straight reporters who worked for news organisations with vast audiences had been taught since their cub days that their first duty was to protect their own credibility and the credibility of their employers. It was for just this purpose that the rules of objectivity had been created. If a reporter wished to retain the trust of his readers, then he had to write about politics from a totally impartial point of view. Most of the reporters covering the campaign hewed closely to the rules of objectivity not only for the sake of advancing themselves in the profession, but also out of a genuine belief that the objective approach produced fair and honest coverage. (Crouse, 2003: 318)

Political journalism is understood to aspire to avoid the evil of bias and to achieve the ideals of fairness and balance. Both these aspirations, and the status of professional objectivity as the sole route to their fulfilment, are to some extent naturalised in (20th Century, American) journalistic discourse as an inevitable consequence of a democratic society's requirements of journalism in the realm of politics. In this ideological context, as Schudson has pointed out, 'The value of objectivity is upheld specifically against partisan journalism, in which newspapers are the declared allies or agents of political parties and their reporting of news is an element of partisan struggle' (Schudson, 2001: 165).

There was, however, a time before these impossibly 'objective' ideals were incorporated into the ideology of journalism, and the reasons why the standards of objectivity were first formulated, and then became the dominant journalistic ideology, may in fact be slightly more complicated than the 'straight reporters' were taught when they were cubs.

In examining Gonzo's relationship to the ideological underpinnings of the practice of political journalism, it is worthwhile to examine the history of that ideology; both in terms of the developments which produce it, and in terms of previous practices in which it is, perhaps, possible to discern elements which return in later literary, and Gonzo, journalism. I do not propose to undertake a wider, more general historical enquiry into the roots of American literary journalism as a modern form, within which to situate Gonzo in terms of the literary and/or journalistic history of the United States, though I do intend to examine parallels between Gonzo and earlier, pre-objectivity journalistic ideologies in America¹¹.

The Realm of Speculation

In terms of continuities and throwbacks within the theory and practice of journalism in America, the overt and militant political partisanship of Gonzo journalism, far from being any kind of innovation in itself, is in fact considerably older than the ideologies of professionalism and objectivity which came to dominate 20th Century news media. Gerald J. Baldasty, in an analysis of the publicly subsidised, privately patronised press which served America in the early 1830s, found that:

Newspapers of the Jacksonian era were opinionated, politically biased, one-sided, argumentative and frequently strident ... Editors debated with one another over the political issues and candidates as if the fate of democracy and of the nation itself was at stake. (Baldasty, 2011: 278)

The implicit suggestion that objective reporting would not be appropriate when the fate of America is in question seems odd when considered from within an ideological framework that assumes that when the functioning of democracy is at stake, subjectivity is, if anything, more forbidden than ever. Again, the needs of this thesis do not call for

¹¹ A much fuller account of how the wider tradition of modern, narrative literary journalism in America emerged during the period immediately following the Civil War is contained in Hartsock (2000).

an examination of all the wider trends in older American journalistic history, but nonetheless it is perhaps worth mentioning that for a parenthetically illuminating counter-point, theorising why ‘the golden age of America’s founding was also the gutter age of American reporting’ (Burns, 2006: 4), within an account of the role of the thoroughly biased and partisan press in the formation of America, see Burns (2006).

Let us assume at least momentarily that the standards of ‘professionalism’ which eventually reined in the practice of passionately subjective, partisan debate, in favour of an idealised objectivity aimed, at least in theory, to provide the public with the unbiased, un-spun information that citizens required in order rationally to perform their democratic duty as voters. Let us further assume that a professional, objective journalist is able to provide these objectively true facts, undistorted by any subjectivity. This, crucially, must as a matter of course mean the exclusion of all explanation, context, analysis or comment of any kind, none of which can possibly be purely objective, even in theory. Let us then ask, is this the best possible way for political journalism to function within a modern democracy? The ideology of contemporary journalism might answer ‘yes’, but previous journalistic ideologies have, at times, made an interesting case for answering, as Hunter Thompson did, with a resounding ‘no’. This goes beyond the generalised ethical commitment of ‘creative nonfiction’, not to whatever might constitute the official, objective record, but rather to reporting direct, subjective, remembered experience, as a route to truthfulness: ‘Although one might ask, “Is it ethical to do so?” the only viable answer is, as it has been for all writers, “It would be unethical *not* to do so”’ (Bloom, 2003: 278). This might be seen as in some ways applying generally to Gonzo, but in the context of the perceived public function of political reportage, there are specific, in a sense more pragmatic issues in play, when contesting the role of objectivity.

The contemporary student of the ideology of objective journalism might suppose that the partisanship and propaganda of earlier epochs of political journalism resulted from a mercenary lack of concern for principal and/or a devotion to one's own political bias, above the call of the ideal of 'honest', unbiased journalism, in service to the public. Journalistic objectivity has, after all, been considered as a ritualised set of practices which are intended to help to defend the journalist against the risks of her profession, including the risk of being attacked not just for the likes of inaccuracy, but for charges of unfairness (Tuchman, 1972). One might perhaps judge Gonzo journalism as biased and therefore flawed journalism, and consider that bias in terms of Thompson's failing to meet the standards required of a journalist, by prioritising his own political views above journalistic professionalism. This would, however, represent a theoretical misunderstanding of both the history of American political journalism, and indeed of the discernible political engagement of Gonzo.

Baldasty notes that in the early 1800s, failure to take a side in politics was the taboo. The reasoning behind this, rather than a lack of professionalism, was the assumption that neutrality indicated either the absence of an opinion, or the absence of the courage to espouse one's opinion. Neither deficiency was considered acceptable in a journalist if he (it was unlikely to be a she) was to fulfil his duty to the public: 'Editors saw their readers as *voters* and provided content that would woo them to a particular party and then mobilize them to vote. There was no room for indecision or neutrality in the press' (Baldasty, 2011: 280). McChesney provides a similar interpretation of American journalistic practice prior to the 20th century:

The notion that journalism should be politically neutral, nonpartisan, professional, even 'objective', did not emerge until the 20th century. During the first two or three generations of the republic such notions for the press would have been nonsensical, even unthinkable. The point of journalism was to

persuade as well as inform, and the press tended to be highly partisan. (McChesney, 2003: 300)

It is important to note that such a philosophy of journalism is not necessarily inferior or more primitive than the ideologies of objectivity and professionalism, and that it certainly did not represent a lack of respect or dedication to the functioning of the press, and to its essential role in democratic politics.

I should make it clear that I am not equating Gonzo with Jacksonian-era journalism; merely comparing some of the criticisms that the ideology of journalistic objectivity might bring to bear on each. Whereas Gonzo rejects objectivity as an impossibility and an unhelpful abstraction, the standards of journalism in, for example, the 1820s in America, were such that the role of the political activist was not a betrayal or corruption of the role of the newspaperman, but rather a naturally essential part of the job. They did not see themselves as self-serving or non-journalists in their subjective partisanship, but saw themselves rather as ‘having a *duty* to debate’ (Baldasty, 2011: 280) and, culturally, given the political activist role of the newspaper editor, ‘Evenhandedness or objectivity was not so much bad as inappropriate’ (Baldasty, 2011: 283).

What is perhaps most interesting here is the ideological kinship between what the newspaper editors of this period saw as the natural functioning of political journalism, and the rationale of Hunter Thompson's politically activist Gonzo journalism of the 1960s and 70s, which was so often considered in terms of radical innovation. It is perhaps strange to consider that this odd concept of objectivity becomes naturalised to the point where it becomes all but unthinkable for the reporter to consider giving the reader the benefit of her understanding, her knowledge, her impressions, in order to provide context and meaning to what is being said, rather than a simple transcript of the events which are understood to compose the election news cycle. It should be noted that

this is more than simply a matter of limiting the influence of a journalist's 'opinions' on the coverage she produces. In looking at a perceived 21st century crisis in American journalism, McChesney discusses much the same problem, of journalistic professionalism versus the provision of contextual information for readers, and points out the importance of the 'missing' information:

A second flaw in journalism is that it tends to avoid contextualization like the plague. This was the great strength of partisan journalism: it attempted to take every important issue and place it in a larger political ideology, to make sense of it. But under professional standards, to provide meaningful context and background for stories, if done properly, will tend to commit the journalist (and medium) in the controversy professionalism is determined to avoid. Coverage tends to be a barrage of facts and official statements. (McChesney, 2003: 304)

The blandly unhelpful election coverage which 'the straight reporters' have been trained to produce thus represents, in a sense, more than just a missed opportunity to persuade the voters. It can be read as a failure of the media infrastructure, en masse, even to attempt properly to educate the electorate about the meaning of the news.

Thompson rages against the rules which dictate that even when a journalist is convinced of a candidate's essential quality, good or ill, through accumulated experience which the reader/voter cannot hope to share, the inclusion of such insight is not acceptable in any form within campaign reporting:

There is no way to grasp what a shallow, contemptible, and hopelessly dishonest old hack Hubert Humphrey really is until you've followed him around for a while on the campaign trail. The double-standard realities of campaign journalism, however, make it difficult for even the best of the 'straight/objective' reporters to write what they actually think and feel about a candidate. (Thompson, 1983: 209)

A sense of some aspects of the history of American journalism puts this position in its proper context. It is not a tirade against 'honest' journalism and everything a journalist should stand for, as might be implied by the idea that the codes of professionalism and objectivity represent the only possible ideology through which to incorporate journalism into the ideal functioning of a democratic society. This position may be seen rather as a

plea against the reduction of journalism from the ideal of helping the reader to understand what is going on in the world, to merely telling the reader the barest objectively 'true' facts, stripped of context and explanation to the point of incomprehensibility. This is an important lesson gleaned from considering how American journalism of the eighteenth century approached 'bias', useful for constructing readings of 'political' Gonzo journalism, and it is not the only one.

It is also during this era of partisan journalism that literary methods come to be employed within political journalism which are similar, in some respects, to the metaphorical and fantastical flights of fancy which are utilised in Gonzo, as they were in the 19th century, in order to mock political opponents in a quasi-personal fashion, with overtly partisan intent. As Hazel Dicken-Garcia notes of the newspapers of the early 1800s, in an examination of changing trends in American news across the period, 'Personal invective and aspersions on individual character permeated most of the writing in both Federalist and Anti-Federalist papers, and it seems that nothing was too gross for publication' (Dicken-Garcia, 2011: 239). I intend here to assert a kinship not only in that Gonzo also utilised and incorporated an abundance of both personal invective and aspersions on individual character, but that there are stylistic and thematic echoes of this earlier journalism in Gonzo's voice. Aspects of this include Gonzo's use of fiction, fable and rumour, and, particularly, its use of the 'gross' – where the depiction of public life collides with the physical, the bodily, the visceral and/or the vulgar.

Consider the example Dicken-Garcia cites from an 1801 edition of a Connecticut paper called *American Mercury*, commenting on the return from France of an American diplomat:

We have it from Federal authority that the Col. Peremptorily asserts [that] every woman in France is without exception, a prostitute. Does the Col. *Know* this to

be true? If he does not, it will be agreed that he ought not to say it. – And if he does, Lord bless us, what a hero he must be! ... What, every woman in France! Why there must be seven or eight million of them! (*American Mercury*, 1801 cited in Dicken-Garcia, 2011: 239)

Or consider the following extract from a fabricated story, also published in 1801, regarding a judge:

Although evidently intoxicated when he alighted there, yet he went on drinking whiskey to great excess and abusing the gentlemen of Washington. Sometimes he pretended to be asleep in his chair, suddenly would start up with some incoherent exclamation, and take another drink. After a while he said he had a fever, proceeding to strip himself naked, took a sheet and hung it over his shoulders, and walked before the door thus exposed. This soon collected a multitude of boys, to whom he addressed many pleasant things affecting to talk and act like one of themselves. – Presently he ordered water to be carried to the stable, and compelled a black smith's boy to throw several buckets of cold water on him. (*Hampshire Gazette*, 1801 cited in Dicken-Garcia, 2011: 242)

With minor corrections for changes in syntax over time, it is possible to imagine Hunter Thompson making use of much the same methods to make his political points, and making much the same jokes in much the same way.

Whether or not this story was in any way based on what came to be called objective truth, or was intended to be read as such, is perhaps unknowable, and certainly beyond the scope of this work, but Dicken-Garcia notes of such stories that: 'The tone was very personal, often ridiculing the individuals involved, and one suspects that details (or even whole stories) were frequently fabricated' (Dicken-Garcia, 2011: 242). The prevalence of the practice of using fiction in this way within the political rhetoric of partisan journalism could perhaps be seen to make such methods operate in a different way than they can be seen to operate within Gonzo. The use of fiction to editorialise in depicting political figures, by the time Thompson employs it in 1972, for example, is likely to have carried more shock value than it did in 1801, when it was commonplace, and it may also have caused more confusion among readers as to the text's relationship with the complicated concept of 'truth'.

Gonzo journalism contains more than its fair share of fabricated details or even whole stories deployed to illustrate points, add colour and, often, ridicule the individuals involved, in much the same ways as those which seem to have been popular around 1801. Sometimes it is clear that these imagined sections are imagined, as in the case of putting words in the mouth of some hypothetical staffer working for Hubert Humphrey, as a way of saying that the Humphrey campaign is bound to be concerned about possible attacks from Gene McCarthy:

So ... ah ... Hube? You still with me? Jesus Christ! Where's that sunlamp? We gotta get more of a tan on you, baby. You look *grey*. (Long pause, no reply from the candidate ...) Well, Hube, we might just as well face this thing. We're comin' up fast on what just might be a real nasty little problem for you ... let's not try to kid ourselves, Hube, he's a really *mean* sonofabitch. (Long pause, etc. ...) You're gonna have to be *ready*, Hube. (Thompson, 1983: 50)

This type of imagined dialogue illustrates, or tries to, something of the nature of the workings of a political campaign, and at the same time the nervousness and speech patterns of the fictional staffer, and the imagined grim silence of the candidate, mock and belittle Humphrey, whom Thompson repeatedly attacked in his work.

Small fragments of fantasy such as this litter *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, and represent one aspect of the text's colourful methodology in giving political figures more humanity (mostly in the worst possible senses of the word) than could be supplied by the bare facts approach of a 'straight reporter'. Another example of the Gonzo use of this method might be Thompson's sudden inclusion of fictional violence by Nixon staffers in an account of a press conference:

At that point, McGregor cracked Stans upside the head with a Gideon Bible and called him a 'thieving little fart'. McGregor then began shoving the rest of us out of the room, but when Stans tried to leave, McGregor grabbed him by the neck and jerked him back inside. Then he slammed the door and threw the bolt ... (Thompson, 1983: 349)

This is an obvious attack on political operatives whom Thompson considers brutal, criminal and dangerous, manifesting in a fictional incident what he thinks of them, but nonetheless it should be noted, he takes care that he should not be misunderstood and taken literally. The above is immediately followed by the disclaimer that it was indeed fiction (or at least, not fact): ‘Jesus, why do I write things like that? I must be getting sick, or maybe just tired of writing about these greasy Rotarian bastards’ (Thompson, 1983: 349). Sometimes, though just as obviously imagined, these sections of politically-loaded fiction are without a clear informative, illustrative aspect and have more to do with the emotional expression of opinion, attacking a political figure without any rationality or reality being involved.

I think it is thus possible, in some sense, to trace a kind of literary journalistic tradition, linking the kind of journalism that once asserted ambassadors to be whoremongers and judges to be exhibitionistic drunks, with the Gonzo journalism that imagined a re-elected President Nixon as a werewolf:

At the stroke of midnight in Washington, a drooling red-eyed beast with the legs of a man and a head of a giant hyena crawls out of its bedroom window in the South Wing of the White House and leaps fifty feet down to the lawn ... pauses briefly to strangle the Chow watchdog, then races off into the darkness ... towards the Watergate, snarling with lust, loping through the alleys behind Pennsylvania Avenue, and trying desperately to remember which one of those four hundred identical balconies is the one outside Martha Mitchell's apartment ... (Thompson, 1983: 417)

There is, perhaps, a discernible continuity here, inasmuch as despite possible, superficial differences in taste and style, both the literary method and the ultimate ends to which it is employed bear striking similarities in terms of the theorisation of political journalism.

Probably the most prominent example of the politically-motivated use of deliberate untruth in *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* is, however, Thompson's

infamous accusation that Ed Muskie was addicted to a South American drug called Ibogaine. Thompson used this idea as a literary conceit in order to criticise and ridicule the candidate's public persona and speaking style, as well as his breakdown while being heckled, as symptoms typical of Ibogaine abuse:

It was noted, among other things, that he had developed a tendency to roll his eyes wildly during TV interviews, that his thought patterns had become strangely fragmented, and that not even his closest advisors could predict when he might suddenly spiral off into babbling rages, or neo-comatose funks. (Thompson, 1983: 152)

Regarding Muskie's behaviour when a drunken heckler grabbed for his legs, Thompson uses the Ibogaine fiction to colour his mocking analysis of the candidate's response:

It is entirely conceivable – given the known effects of Ibogaine – that Muskie's brain was almost paralyzed by hallucinations at the time; that he looked out at that crowd and saw gila monsters instead of people, and that his mind snapped completely when he felt something large and apparently vicious clawing at his legs. (Thompson, 1983: 152)

This story is presented, like those cited from 1801, in a plausible, journalistic fashion. (Perhaps too plausible – the implications of the fact that it was taken at face value in certain quarters will be discussed later in this chapter.) The purposes to which it is put in the Text, both literary and political, come into sharper focus when it is considered not, as it might conventionally be categorised, as a lie, a hoax, or some kind of unprofessional practice, but rather in terms of a different ideology of journalism, founded on bias but not dishonesty, persuasion before information, and, of course, honest subjectivity rather than impossible objectivity.

Considering Gonzo in terms of older journalistic ideologies, which are not grounded in the myth of objectivity, is useful in illuminating certain aspects of Gonzo, as I've been attempting to demonstrate. It is also useful, however, to shine a socio-historical light on Gonzo's operation through examining the roots of the philosophy of professionalism and objectivity in American journalism, which Gonzo (largely) rejected. The penny

press of the 1830s, in its operation and in its rhetoric of self-justification through objectivity, provides a necessary historical dimension for the theoretical consideration of the concept of objective journalism, and thus for the theorisation of Gonzo's rejection of the traditional ideology. In examining the deployment of the ideology of objective journalism within the American democratic framework in this period, Dan Schiller summarises the political, theoretical argumentation:

Objectivity invoked alongside and in support of natural rights became coextensive with resistance to encroachment by longstanding European corruptions. With its universalistic intent, its concern for public rationality based on equal access to the facts, objectivity harbored a profoundly democratic promise. From the 1830s the informational system was not to be the exclusive preserve of a king, a baron, a president or a class but rather, as it seemed, of the political nation itself. (Schiller, 2011: 427)

The case for objective journalism, that the task of selecting and presenting the information that the public needs in order rationally to exercise their democratic powers should be carried out impersonally and professionally, seems compelling. The argument goes that the provision of news should occur without any bias or indeed individuality on the part of journalists influencing, distorting or concealing what the public needs to know. It is thus clearly implied that through training and adherence to codes of practice journalists should become as automatically objective, fair and balanced as cameras or sound-recorders. As discussed somewhat in the previous chapter, the main problem with this theory is that in practice it is completely impossible.

The objective journalist is an impossible human being (see Chapter One), but the point of interest here is that the impartial newspaper is an impossible institution. Beyond the issues which I have dealt with previously regarding the epistemological and mimetic limitations of the individual, there are political, social, historical forces which apply to the context of political journalism. In the context of modern America, the ideology of objective journalism can be seen to represent an illusion which exists to conceal the

exercise of power. As Schiller notes, this ideology was in some respects a hustle from its very inception:

Purported equality of access to news concealed, and left to the discretion of news-gathering organizations, the question of which facts would take the measure of the world each day. 'Public opinion' began to conceal the unequal strengths of entities in the marketplace of ideas. Individuals who were largely barred from substantive decisions about news were lumped together with governmental and corporate institutions that exercised a direct and powerful interest in the same sphere. News quickly became a language of power, an idiom through which the correspondence between the public truth of events and the social power of their perpetrators was routinely renegotiated. (Schiller, 2011: 427)

There is, I think, some theoretical profit to be had in incorporating this approach into reading a rejection of the ideology of traditionally objective journalism, such as Hunter Thompson performed as writer/character and such as Gonzo embodied. This dissent does not represent the rejection of an institutional framework which once functioned satisfactorily in meeting the needs of society, doing so with ideological and ethical coherence, but which has over time become perhaps corrupted and certainly inadequate. What is being rejected may be read, rather, as an ideology which, though naturalised by myth and obscured by tradition, represents simply another facet of the machinery through which the powerful manufacture 'the truth' as it is publicly understood. It may be considered, moreover, as an ideology which was never intended, or fit, for any other purpose.

From this viewpoint it becomes significant that Thompson was not the only journalist covering the 1972 Presidential election to express the feeling that professional journalistic objectivity was structurally incapable of providing for the needs of the electorate. *Rolling Stone's* Timothy Crouse, in his book on the coverage of the election, notes that 'Some of the better minds on the plane' would have agreed with conservative journalist Brit Hume about objectivity's inevitable shortcomings:

‘Those guys on the plane’, said Hume, ‘claim that they're trying to be objective. They should try to be honest. And they're *not* being honest. Their so-called objectivity is just a guise for superficiality. They report what one candidate said, then they go and report what the other candidate said with equal credibility. They never get around to finding out if the guy is telling the truth. They just pass the speeches along without trying to confirm the substance of what the candidates are saying. What they pass off as objectivity is just a mindless kind of neutrality’. (Crouse, 2003: 305)

Thompson himself denounced objective journalism, in print and in practice, and often openly mocked its conventions, as, for example, when he prefaced an assessment of the political manoeuvring Hubert Humphrey might have been planning for the Democratic National Convention, with the following sarcastic disclaimer:

Well ... as much as I hate to get away from objective journalism, even briefly, there is no other way to explain what that treacherous bastard appears to be cranking himself up for this time around, except by slipping momentarily into the realm of speculation. (Thompson, 1983: 260)

Thompson makes it clear in his writing that objective journalism is a tool unfit for the purpose of informing people about the progress and meaning of the campaign and its issues, as well as the personal qualities of the candidates. An attempt to demonstrate a viable alternative methodology and approach is another prominent aspect of the Text of Gonzo journalism. Given that my project here is, and remains, a reading of this Text within an essentially poststructuralist framework, it is important to remember that the 'truth' is not what is at issue here. Neither the truth of what objective journalism is, nor the truth of Hunter Thompson's intentions is an object of such study. What is at issue is a possible reading of the 'Text' of 'objective journalism', and the discernible intent of Thompson-the-character, as writer, within the Text.

It is possible to read 'objective journalism' in this way, within the Text of Gonzo journalism, and, indeed, elsewhere. As Maras notes in assessing the history and status of the ideal of journalistic objectivity, while for some it remains an indispensable principle of journalism, ‘For others, objectivity is a kind of deception, obscuring

cultural, capitalistic or national bias behind talk of a neutral point of view; promoting faith in an external truth or ideal, an individualistic viewing position that doesn't exist' (Maras, 2013: 1). In terms of the election coverage produced by the mainstream press in 1972, the Gonzo Text represents the practical impact of the ideology's perceived weaknesses. Traditional, professional, objective journalism was also criticised by others as being particularly ill-suited to the requirements of covering the 1972 Presidential campaign, specifically:

Taking comfort from the belief that they were merely following the 'rules of objectivity', the White House correspondents had failed to make Nixon account for the actions of his Administration. Meanwhile, the McGovern reporters had adhered to the same rules of objectivity out of a genuine conviction that they must remain 'fair'; they had refused to use advocacy journalism in McGovern's behalf. (Crouse, 2003: 380)

This campaign was, in some senses, a particularly egregious example of the structural failures of objectivity as a journalistic ideology, but this failure is noteworthy due to impact and magnitude – not because objective journalism's inability to produce here the fairness which is its justification is in any sense unique, or even unusual¹².

As the journalist Richard Brookhiser has pointed out, the perceived problems in the public discourses around the 1972 election can be viewed, looking back on longer narratives of American mediatised politics, as one episode in the repetition of what can be in some respects an unsatisfactory democratic process:

For the last twenty years the consensus of reporters following the campaign and commentators observing it has been that the presidential elections have been dirty (as in 1980), empty (as in 1984 or 1976), or both (1972). (Brookhiser, 1989: 257-258)

In more general terms, as Schiller observes, the contested reading of objective journalism's inadequacies does itself possess many of the aspects of being a 'traditional'

¹² McGinniss (1970) offers an insider's perspective on the media packaging of Nixon as a candidate for the 1968 campaign, which places into fuller context some of the practical causes of the failures of the press to hold the Nixon machine politically to account.

ideology. It is traditional to the extent that many of the same criticisms which have been levelled against the institutions and institutional character of the American press, at least since the criticisms of advertiser influence and biased reporting of labour disputes of the early 20th century (see Schiller, 2011 esp. 431-7 for a fuller historical account), represent essentially the same theoretical criticisms which contemporary media scholarship concerns itself with, and which Hunter Thompson expressed in his political writings.

Within mainstream culture, if I may make momentary use of an imprecise category for the sake of convenience:

Disagreement over the substantive character of objectivity itself, however, has tended to be sharply limited. Instead, social conflicts have been disguised, contained, and displaced through the imposition of news objectivity, a framework legitimating the exercise of social power over the interpretation of reality. Those without institutionalized resources have, time and again, found themselves pilloried and marginalized in the press, while crucial issues have been amplified in such a way as to lead the general public to accept institutional control. (Schiller, 2011: 438)

The rules of objective journalism are unjust, and they are understood to be unjust by those who take an interest in the power relations which surround their social existence, of which Hunter Thompson was one. Gonzo journalism represents a rejection of these rules, and of the ideology that they represent, but it is important to remember that this does not mean that Gonzo journalism had to break every rule, every time. Gonzo journalism represents a rejection of the ideology, manifested in a negotiated 'playing' with these traditions, rules, codes and methodologies – breaking them, not breaking them, and, most interestingly, pushing them to extremes.

Cheap Thrills

Gonzo negotiates and renegotiates the boundaries of journalistic practice, whose roots lie in the complex history of journalism's institutional ideology, which I have examined above. As discussed in the previous chapter, more than simply blending fact and fiction, the nature of Gonzo performs the inherent instability of the distinction between the two, toying with the question of what it can get away with and still be journalism, and implicitly problematising the possibilities of defining journalism in the first place. In examining the political aspects of Gonzo journalism with reference to journalism's traditional ideologies and its political, institutional structures, the figure of Hunter Thompson as Gonzo journalist is, once again, both critically indispensable, and a textual feature which complicates the application of traditional theoretical approaches. The Text is both text, ostensibly political in content, and performance. There is the traditional 'journalistic' content, and there is the performance of Gonzo as action, method, experience of the inscribed figure of Hunter Thompson within the Text. That performance has a political character which is entangled with, but by no means identical to, the political rhetoric of the overt 'message' of the work. All of which is a complicated way of saying, in essence, that there is political content in both what the figure of Thompson-the-Author says, and in what Thompson-the-character does.

In terms of this latter aspect, where the Gonzo text is considered as a record of action (the 'truth' of which remains, it must again be stressed, not relevant), there are political implications to Thompson's deviance and excess. I have, in the previous chapter, considered some of these, particularly the implications of drug-taking, in terms of the cultural conventions regarding experience, and indeed in terms of criminal law. Here, however, building on the discussion of its historicity, I intend to examine not Gonzo's

violations of the laws of man and of logical positivism, but specifically Thompson-the-character's performed relationship with the rules and professional standards of the post-war American political journalist. This performed relationship can, I feel, be profitably read through the consideration of the concept of 'edgework', though 'edgework' may prove as hard a theoretical concept as 'Gonzo' to pin down.

'Edgework' is first applied as a sociological term in a paper by Stephen Lyng examining the social psychological character of a specific kind of voluntary risk-taking. His main example was skydiving. The (originally hyphenated) word is in fact borrowed from *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (Thompson, 2005a: 80), but the fact that Thompson is credited with coining the term is not the primary reason that I wish to examine the concept here. It is in fact a more useful approach for present purposes if the term is considered firstly as Lyng employed it – his use of the term is still the root of its current academic applications – before considering what the term may signify in Gonzo. As Lyng sets forth while making his case for considering his skydivers in sociological as opposed to primarily psychological terms:

In the section that follows, I attempt to deal with this [the difficulty of reclassifying risk-taking in terms of the sociological] by introducing the concept of 'edgework' as a classifying category for voluntary risk taking. As I will show, this concept allows us to view high-risk behaviour as involving, most fundamentally, the problem of negotiating the boundary between chaos and order. (Lyng, 1990: 854-5)

The problem of negotiating the boundary between chaos and order is certainly a relevant problem to the consideration of Gonzo, but edgework represents a specific approach to the problem, a specific type of activity, performing playing with the edge.

Lyng's description of what he means when he talks about edgework is worth quoting here at some length:

In abstract terms, edgework is best understood as an approach to the boundary between order and disorder, form and formlessness. As we will see shortly, edgeworkers typically seek to define the limits of performance for a particular object or form. One category of edgework involves efforts to discover the performance limits of certain types of technology, as when test pilots take their airplanes 'to the outside of the envelope' (i.e., pushing it to its aerodynamic limits) or when race-car drivers push their cars to their mechanical limits. Another category consists of testing the limits of body or mind, as illustrated by marathon runners attempting to discover their physical limits or artists endeavouring to realize their creative potential through intense work schedules. In many cases, edgeworkers explore the performance limits of both themselves and a material form; with the increasingly sophisticated nature of modern technology, individuals must sometimes push themselves to the outer limits of human performance in order to reach the performance limits of the technology under their control. (Lyng, 1990: 858)

This framework has a wide theoretical application, but in terms of Thompson's edgework, the pressing question might concern whether the 'edgework' of an artist is confined to an intense work schedule? Can't the artistic edgeworker push the limits of their medium to edges of possibility, working the edges of acceptability, of controversy, even of crime – thinking of graffiti and other guerrilla artforms? And if so, how much would this edgework differ categorically from edgework negotiating the limits of a material technology, to which Lyng refers? Though the conceptual framework of Lyng's paper does not overtly make room for it, I would contend that, though not a material form, in a very meaningful sense Gonzo journalism itself may be considered, for the purposes of reading the edgework of Thompson as both character and writer, as such a piece of 'sophisticated modern technology'.

Lyng is aware that Hunter Thompson is the originator of the word, but in his framework, which is intended to explain, in essence, why people find it fun to risk their lives within certain circumstances, I feel he simplifies and changes 'edgework' into a concept which, though still related, is not what the term means within, and for, Gonzo. Lyng explains his appropriation of the term primarily, though not exclusively, in terms of drugs:

The term itself is borrowed from the journalist Hunter S. Thompson, who has used it to describe a variety of anarchic human experiences, the most infamous being his experimentation with drugs. Thompson's journalistic accounts of many different types of edgework give powerful expression to the essential character of this experience. Indeed, negotiating the boundary between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness, and sanity and insanity is a central theme in Thompson's work. (Lyng, 1990: 855)

The 'edgework' to be found in drugs is, for Lyng, apparently confined to the edge of what can be survived and returned from. The limit to be found is in many ways an essentially physical one. Playing with the boundary of how much you can take without overdosing is not unlike playing with the boundary of how fast and low you can get before deploying your parachute:

The 'edge', or boundary line, confronted by the edgeworker can be defined in many different ways: life versus death, consciousness versus unconsciousness, sanity versus insanity, an ordered sense of self and environment versus a disordered self and environment. This more general definition of the edge is consistent with Hunter Thompson's conceptualization of certain kinds of drug use as edgework. Alcohol users who engage in binge drinking negotiate the line between consciousness and unconsciousness, while the use of hallucinogenic drugs may push one over the line separating an ordered from a disordered sense of self and environment. (Lyng, 1990: 857-8)

In this conception of drug-use as/and edgework, the risk is the motivation – the point of the game. Finding out what you can survive, physically, was certainly a part of Thompson's reported edgework, within the performance of Gonzo, but it was not the whole purpose of the exercise by any means.

Edgework is about risk, but it can be about more than physical risk – it can be about transgression, against not just the law of self-preservation and personal, physical equilibrium, but against social codes and conventions. In commenting on Lyng's construction of edgework, criminologists O'Neill and Seal similarly observe that 'Engagement in such transgressive activities can be exciting, but it can also be a moment of resistance' (O'Neill and Seal, 2012: 2). As the sociologist Mike Presdee asserted in his work on what he called 'the carnival of crime', the thrills of the edge are

more complicated than life and death, perhaps even more complicated than control and chaos: 'The quest for excitement is directly related to the breaking of boundaries, of confronting parameters and playing at the margins of social life in the challenging of controllers and their control mechanisms' (Presdee, 2000: 7). It is possible to bring this concept to bear not just on taking large quantities of drugs, or riding a motorcycle to the limit of safety, but on being a hippie and blending in at a District Attorneys' convention on narcotics and dangerous drugs (whether on them or not), and, most importantly, on negotiating the acceptable edges of journalism. Unlike the physical limits of self or form to which Lyng refers, these edges were entirely ideological and intangible, but that didn't mean that there wasn't a chasm yawning beyond them, and that is all that edgework, and the edgeworker, requires.

The performative dimension of edgework is where the edge, made manifest in the edgeworker's triumph over it, meets the social dimension and becomes culturally accessible. There is cultural potency in such display, since there is, or at least can be, a spectacle to the edgeworker's victory over the voluntarily assumed risk; a sense in which the spectator, in whatever form, is able to share vicariously in 'the thrill' which is perhaps the defining feature of edgework. Edgework as transgressive spectacle capitalises on the fundamental charisma of transgression, in Gonzo's case both as transgressive journalism and as the journalism of a transgressor:

Put simply, transgressing and doing wrong are for many an exciting and pleasurable experience. For others to be involved in some way in the act of transgression as a voyeur is pleasure enough. To watch, to be there yet absent, is enough. (Presdee, 2000: 30)

This cultural effect is often (perhaps always) related to taboos, rules and dangers, rational or not, whose force is, at least to some extent, taken as natural and thus unquestioned. Such strictures include, for example, the rule not to jump out of a plane if

you don't have to, not to steal, and not to accuse Presidential candidates of being addicted to Ibogaine with no evidence of any kind, etc.

It is important to remember that, in this sense, edgework is a subset of deviance. Since not all deviance is necessarily 'thrilling', not all deviance is edgework, but all edgework is, at least from some perspectives, deviance. It is never completely 'normal' (whatever that may be) to push a performance to the edge (whatever that, also, may be) just for the hell of it. Walking past the 'no swimming' sign and diving in is deviance. Jumping off the cliff with the 'no jumping – underwater rocks' sign, because you think you can miss the rocks, is edgework. But where things get really theoretically interesting is where we find the cultural edgeworker, like Thompson, (perhaps implicitly, but nonetheless, clearly) calling up to the spectators to come on in, the water's fine, not just showing off his edgework, but denigrating the taboos he's toying with. The best word for that might be dissidence, but this enquiry isn't primarily concerned with trying to give things the best possible names, though that isn't necessarily a bad place to start.

Another possible interpretation is to consider Gonzo's taboo-breaking reporting of the breaking of taboos as a kind of second order edgework; inasmuch as some types of culturally productive practice may be edgework, there can be edgework *about* edgework. In any case, when approaching edgework as a cultural, rather than primarily social psychological act, this sense of the possible relevance of political dissidence to the performance of edgework, is strikingly absent from Lyng's original model. This is perhaps why his use of the concept of edgework becomes, ironically, problematic when applied to the types of performance in reference to which Thompson originally coined the term. One key difficulty, relating to theoretical issues which I've touched upon in the preceding chapter, has to do with the relationship Lyng discerns between edgework, and

'work' – work in this case being constrained, non-spontaneous and alienating, in the modern, Marxist, post-industrial understanding:

Thus, for some, the dearth of possibilities for spontaneous and self-realizing action in the economic and bureaucratic spheres can be compensated for in the leisure-time pursuit of play, particularly those forms of play that involve both risk and skill ... People find in some leisure pursuits a requirement for the types of skills that have been systematically purged from the labor process under capitalist ownership and experience what they cannot in work – an opportunity for action that is conscious, purposive, concentrated, physically and mentally flexible, and skillful. In short, when the social context of constraint is distorted by separation, conflict, and contradiction, people often seek a substitute for spontaneous action in pursuits that offer some of the phenomenological characteristics of such action. (Lyng, 1990: 870-1)

This description in a sense maps the territory of the dissent from capitalist normality represented by edgework, but disregards the intrinsic rebelliousness of such dissent. Others have noted that the constraints of consumerist life push people, at their leisure, towards the edge, but without ignoring, as Lyng seems to, the possible political consequences of the transgressive appetites produced by such alienated leisure pursuits.

Consider the following description of much the same drives toward edgework as those examined above by Lyng, investigated from a much more culturally-centred perspective by Presdee:

As everyday life becomes less and less interesting, so it also becomes less and less bearable and there is felt a general desire for daily excitement that becomes an essential ingredient in a consumer commodity culture. Excitement is now created for consumption in a multitude of manners such as bungee jumping, spectacular rides, ballooning, theme parks and carnivals, all aimed at the commodification of excitement. All these need to be bought at the market rate. The experience of excitement can also be attained by a large range of criminal activities. Bank fraud and theft, joyriding, manipulating the stock market, all contain the thrills and spills of edge-work. In a society that demands excitement and desire in order to keep the momentum of the marketplace, we can expect the problems associated with the quest for excitement to become both enduring and extensive. (Presdee, 2000: 62)

In his consideration of edge-work in terms of the broader category of 'leisure pursuits', although he notes the ways in which modern society produces the alienation, boredom and insatiable hunger for unreflective sensation, which in turn produces the desire for

(and admiration of) edgework, Lyng perhaps misses something fundamental of its dissenting character.

This is not to deny that in a sense, some of the responsibility for producing the appetites satisfied by edgework can be considered as belonging to the nature of consumerist culture itself: 'With its emphasis on diversity, novelty, play and self-expression, the market attempts to shift parameters of expectation. Consequently, consumer culture and aspirational culture are now locked in a deadly embrace, each begetting the other' (Hayward, 2004: 8). Nonetheless, there is something of the nature of edgework that eludes characterisation on purely consumerist terms, complicating the idea of thrills for sale, with or without an element of real danger. Edgework cannot be fully theorised as one of the implicitly homogenous list of 'leisure activities' available within modern consumer culture, like menu items, different in superficial categories of satisfaction, but not in substance.

This unhelpful categorisation is also part of why the model which Lyng defines does not really cover the professional, culturally-productive edgeworker, like Hunter Thompson. Expanding on his 'leisurely' conception of the pursuit of edgework, Lyng does take note of the possibility of professional edgework – in the sense of edgework as the primary economic activity through which the edgeworker makes her living – but this consideration is perhaps somewhat dismissive, and in any case does not really make room for the possible entanglement of edgework and the act of cultural production:

Few people earn their livings as sky divers, rock climbers, motorcycle racers, and such (although some try, and a celebrated minority succeed). Hence, edgework seems to be a desired choice – a way of fulfilling unmet needs – when people have the freedom to spend their time as they please. (Lyng, 1990: 871)

The notion that edgework is intrinsically a leisure activity, rendering those who make a living at it, in whatever form, still essentially pursuing a hobby, however successfully,

and thus not meaningfully different from the 'leisure' edgeworker, on this basis, would be like saying that most people who design their own webpages are unpaid, so professional web-designer seems to be a desired choice.

I do not intend by this analogy to suggest anything beyond an oversimplification on Lyng's part, made even clearer when, discussing the skills of the edgeworker, he considers the case of Hunter Thompson:

Second [as well as being a desired choice], it is also clear that edgework typically involves the use of specific skills. Edgeworkers tend to give high priority to the development and use of skills. Sky divers must develop the skill of flying their bodies in free-fall. Even Hunter Thompson's practice of binge drug taking involves the highly developed skills of a veteran substance abuser, that is, knowing how much to ingest of a particular drug, what combinations of drugs are safe, and so on. (Lyng, 1990: 871)

Hunter Thompson, the Gonzo narrative voice, was *working* when he worked the edge. His edgework was a manifestation of Gonzo's transgressive nature, as a textual feature, in the strictest sense, and was an aspect of the Text of Gonzo, originating within the work itself. It was not a leisure activity, let alone a way of saying 'I'm a skilled drug-taker who knows how not to OD'. For the task of reading the articulation of edgework contained within the Gonzo Text, this construction would be an oversimplification which might lead to misunderstanding.

I do not wish to seem to be making an objective judgement on a matter of subjective interpretation, but Lyng's paper, though helpful in providing a model through which to examine this Gonzo concept, seems to argue that edgework is essentially a category of leisure activity, and that it is grounded so deeply in individual subjective experience as to possess perhaps 'a quality of ineffability', meaning in effect that something of its essence may be beyond the reach of mimesis:

Thus, if people typically find it difficult to describe edgework, it is very likely because the reflective self is simply not present at the height of the experience.

As spontaneous action not immediately directed by the 'me' and not mediated by the knowledge component of the 'me', edgework is not easily expressed in language. Hence, the edgeworkers' admonition that 'if you want to know what it's like, then do it' is appropriate. (Lyng, 1990: 880)

This may be true of all experience – I would argue that it is – but I would contend that suggesting the specific inaccessibility to language of a concept formulated by a writer to describe part of his methodology, is, on its face, theoretically unhelpful, at least in terms of this study.

The already complex relationship of the journalistic methodology of Gonzo to the related concepts of edgework, thrills, carnival and transgression, both as reported and as vicariously consumed, is complicated still further in reference to Gonzo's ostensibly political reporting. This complexity is founded not only in that Thompson-the-character works the edges of different levels of the Text – conventions of journalistic writing, social conventions, criminal law, physical rules of drug-taking etc. as well as the rules surrounding political discourse – but in that all these operations are related, mutually supporting, and entangled. The thrills of edgework are clearly implicated, though the edges are not what Lyng might lead the reader to expect. They also, it might profitably be noted, do not include the (supposedly) exciting, (perhaps) dangerous and superficially edge-iest aspect of journalism – investigating and finding a 'scoop'. Learning an incendiary secret through skill, determination and risk, in the manner of the investigative journalism tradition which stretches at least as far back as Nellie Bly, and which would come to be burned into American consciousness by Woodward and Bernstein, is perhaps as classically 'edgework', in the Lyng sense, as journalistic practice can be.

This was not, however, one of the 'edges' within the practice of professional journalism which was a feature of Gonzo. This is made clear when Thompson openly declares

firstly, that scoops aren't his area, and secondly, that he wouldn't know how to deal with one even if it were to fall into his lap:

There was nothing timely or particularly newsworthy about it, but when your deadline is every two weeks you don't tend to worry about things like scoops and newsbreaks. If Mankiewicz had broken down and admitted to me that night that he was actually a Red Chinese agent and that McGovern had no pulse, I wouldn't have known how to handle it – and the tension of trying to keep that kind of heinous news to myself for the next four days until *Rolling Stone* went to press would almost certainly have caused me to lock myself in my hotel room with eight quarts of Wild Turkey and all the Ibogaine I could get my hands on. (Thompson, 1983: 232)

Gonzo journalism drew any excitement entangled in the Text from different sources; peculiar anomalies like the accidentally-believed Ibogaine incident notwithstanding, Gonzo was never about breaking the big story. This type of edgework is not at issue, although, as I've stated, working the edges of journalistic practice very much is.

In his introduction to *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, Hunter Thompson gives an account of edgework much in accord with Lyng's when he considers why his efforts to meet his bi-weekly deadlines during the 1972 campaign always resulted in the pieces being composed 'in a last-minute, teeth-grinding frenzy' (Thompson, 1983: 16). It is interesting that he is writing, not about substance abuse or any extreme or risky sport, but about working the edge of the *professional* disaster of missing the deadline, when he compares his own instincts with the instinct of jackrabbits 'to wait until the last possible second to dart across the road in front of a speeding car' (Thompson, 1983: 17):

People who claim to know jackrabbits will tell you that they are primarily motivated by Fear, Stupidity and Craziness. But I have spent enough time in jackrabbit country to know that most of them lead pretty dull lives; they are bored with their daily routines: eat, fuck, sleep, hop around a bush now and then No wonder some of them drift over the line into cheap thrills once in a while; there has to be a powerful adrenalin rush in crouching by the side of a road, waiting for the next set of headlights to come along, then streaking out of the bushes with split-second timing and making it across to the other side just inches in front of the speeding front wheels. (Thompson, 1983: 17)

He goes on to relate this account of the experience of the edge to problems, and edges, which are inextricably tied to his existence as a professional writer, in the context of journalism covering national politics.

It is important to realise that in Gonzo, a multiplicity of edges and risks are in play, and often linked together, as for example the twin horrors of insanity and losing contact with one's readers:

When a jackrabbit gets addicted to road-running, it is only a matter of time before he gets smashed – and when a journalist turns into a politics junkie he will sooner or later start raving and babbling in print about things that only a person who has Been There can possibly understand. (Thompson, 1983: 17)

From there this interesting overview of Gonzo on the campaign trail, reporting on politics from the experiential inside, moves to yet another essentially journalistic edge/rule/barrier to be negotiated without reference to traditional/normal/professional practice, concerning the conventions surrounding a journalist knowing something that she can't (or won't) print:

This was one of the traditional barriers I tried to ignore when I moved to Washington and began covering the '72 presidential campaign. As far as I was concerned, there was no such thing as 'off the record'. The most consistent and ultimately damaging failure of political journalism in America has its roots in the clubby/cocktail personal relationships that inevitably develop between politicians and journalists – in Washington or anywhere else where they meet on a day-to-day basis. (Thompson, 1983: 18)

Thompson goes from deadlines, to jackrabbits, to accessibility to the reader, and then on to the traditions of cultivating sources slowly and the 'off-the-record' professional courtesy of political journalism, precisely because these things all evoke the same quintessence of risk and rule-breaking, transgression and the edge. The description of the thrill the jackrabbit feels can be seen as the organising symbol in this section of the text. In considering the way that the Text presents the relationships between these 'edgy' themes, particularly within the exploration of journalism-about-journalism which is so prominent in the overtly political Gonzo texts such as *Fear and Loathing: On the*

Campaign Trail '72, it is clearly theoretically helpful to read and interpret the Gonzo Text itself through the concept of edgework, since this framework deals, as does Gonzo, with what these 'edges' all have in common.

The cultural power of performed transgressive risk lies in what Presdee calls 'the second life of the people', which is a term borrowed from Bakhtin (Bakhtin, 1984 cited in Presdee, 2000: 8), whose meaning is related to edgework, inasmuch as this 'second life' encompasses many of the boundary zones in which suitable edges are to be found:

It is from the second life of the people that the majority of 'transgressions' emanate. It is here that we find the genesis and rationale for behaviour that anticipates the ability to destroy, disrupt and dissent. The second life of the people is that part of life that is inaccessible and untouchable to the 'official' world of the scientific rationality of modernity and its politics, parties and politicians. It is the realm of resentment and irrationality *par excellence* and also the realm of much crime. It is that part of social life that is unknowable to those in power and which therefore stands outside their consciousness and their understanding. They cannot understand it, or indeed even 'read' it as real life, but only as immoral, uncivilised, obscene and unfathomable social behaviour. (Presdee, 2000: 8)

While there are obvious parallels between the cultural terrain mapped out here and the territory which Hunter Thompson called home, to what extent and in what ways Gonzo can be meaningfully understood in terms of this second life of the people, and perhaps even with relation to some specific 'second life of the journalist' is a complex issue.

Is an 'outlaw journalist', as Hunter Thompson was so often called, a kind of outlaw, or merely a kind of journalist – only unacceptable in the terms of an intrinsically acceptable and professional category? The question at hand is defining the relationship between the Gonzo Text and the 'carnival' which Presdee discerns in certain transgressive aspects of unofficial culture:

The second festive life expressed through carnival acts cannot be expressed in official rational life where it quickly becomes criminalised and demonised. It is a life that is expressed through the world of excess, obscenity and degradation ... It is where the irrational laughs and mocks the rational – where truth can be

told against the cold-hearted lies of rational, scientific modernity. The second life is lived in the cracks and holes in the structures of official society ... The expression of the second life of the people is performed and brought to life through carnival, which becomes for rational society understood as no more or less than the carnival of crime. (Presdee, 2000: 8-9)

Does the cultural transgression of Gonzo constitute part of the performance of Presdee's carnival, or is Hunter Thompson merely reporting from it, on it, exploiting it? There is, of course, no objective answer to this question, but the consideration of the issues and possibilities implied in asking it is useful for present purposes.

I should make it plain, here, that there is a rationale behind my deployment of these concepts of carnival and edgework in the theoretical consideration of Gonzo's political reportage, such as *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, rather than in relation to, for example, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, a book which might in some respects be considered as employing the carnival of dissident excess as a major theme, if not as perhaps the organising thematic. This chapter began with a consideration of the theoretical, ideological, historical roots of American journalistic standards, with particular reference to the problem of the provision of political journalism sufficient to the needs of the electorate in a representative democracy. This is, arguably, the area of journalistic ideology with the strongest rules and the most clearly defined boundaries of acceptable professional practice. I have selected edgework and carnival as key aspects of the theoretical framework of this discussion precisely because the nature and application of these concepts within the Gonzo Text are best illuminated, and most illuminating, when considered with reference not to a content of (more or less) pure Gonzo, carnivalesque, edgeworking excess, as might be expected at the Kentucky Derby or on a bender in Vegas, but when blended with the reportage of ostensibly 'hard news'. This is where the contrast between Gonzo and conventional journalism is at its starkest. Examining the complexities of these aspects of the Text is facilitated by

looking at the complex relationship between the journalistic, methodological edgework and the intrusion of the carnival into the formality of political discourse within this political Gonzo reportage. This is perhaps more effective than the consideration of the Gonzo carnival and/or edgework journalism, in a sense, in isolation.

In some parts of *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, it is perhaps possible to consider Thompson as taking the same advantage of this mixture of cultural material that I propose to take. What I mean by that is simply that pieces of counter-culture, at times carnivalesque and seditiously criminal – more within the usual cultural territory of *Rolling Stone Magazine* – may be usefully employed by Gonzo in both explaining developments in politics, and in illuminating how their nature may be understood by the hypothetical *Rolling Stone* reader. A simple example of this is presented when at the Fontainebleau Hotel in Miami, following the Republican National Convention, Thompson is asked to explain what happened by ‘the master pimp and carmeister who runs what they call “the front door” here in these showplace beachfront hotels’ (Thompson, 1983: 337). The political realities of the situation are illuminated not just by Thompson's explanation of Nixon's betrayal of the Republican Party's future interests, but by a criminal's response:

Bobo laughed, understanding it instantly. Pimps and hustlers have a fine instinct for politics. ‘What you're saying is that Nixon just cashed his whole check’, he said. ‘He doesn't give a flying fuck what happens once he gets re-elected – because once he wins, it's all over for him anyway, right? He can't run again ...’ (Thompson, 1983: 341)

This incident does more than explain Nixon's setting up the Republicans to lose in 1976, and more even than humorously pointing out, in order to insult Nixon, that the President's mindset is completely and immediately comprehensible to pimps and hustlers. Criticism of Nixon is the ostensible ‘message’ here, and Inhoff has argued that the text of *Fear and Loathing: On The Campaign Trail '72* can be seen to ‘represent

ways of dealing with fear and anxiety' (Inhoff, 2012: 158) over Nixon's rise, and the rise of the political ideologies which he can be seen to represent. In terms of wider significances within the political sphere, beyond the direct focus on Nixon, the carnival of dissidence and counter-culture blends with the spectacle and struggle of national politics, and the blending makes the latter more comprehensible, more accessible, and perhaps even more human.

These aspects of Gonzo, the high and the low, the mainstream and the marginal, the straight and the twisted, are tightly interwoven in the text, and in the journalistic edgework, throughout *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*. One aspect of this is the journalistic edgework involved in Thompson's subversion of the conventional 'mood-of-the-nation' vox pop. The text is assembled from a long series of features following the whole election cycle through the primaries, the conventions, and the general election, but the first interview in the work is with two random drug-heads encountered by the side of the highway. This unlikely interview sets up from the start of the campaign coverage the method of which the previously discussed encounter with Bobo the pimp is a subtler example; that of using the second life of the people to illustrate the first (or possibly vice versa, depending on perspective):

Lester stared at me for a moment, then shrugged. 'God damn!' he said. 'What a bummer. Why would *anybody* want to get hung up in a pile of shit like Politics?' 'Well '... I said, wondering if there was any sane answer to a question like that: 'It's mainly a personal trip, a very hard thing to explain'. Jerry smiled. 'You talk like you've *tried it*', he said. 'Like maybe you *got off on it*'. 'Not as far as I meant to', I said, 'but definitely high'. Lester was watching me now with new interest. 'I always *thought* that about politicians', he said. 'Just a gang of goddamn power junkies, gone off on their own strange trips'. (Thompson, 1983: 31-2)

It should be mentioned in passing that while the edge of journalistic convention certainly wasn't as sharp at *Rolling Stone Magazine* as it might have been at *Newsweek* or *The New York Times*, this Gonzo project represented new and, in a sense, dangerous

territory in another way for *Rolling Stone*, a magazine which had no obvious business covering the Presidential election at all in the first place. As the stoned Jerry tells Thompson-the-Character when Thompson first mentions his assignment and employer: ‘That's weird! The Stone is into politics?’ (Thompson, 1983: 31)

These issues will be considered in greater depth later in this chapter, but it is worth noting here that Thompson(-the-character as well as the author) is, in some ways, placed in a double-bind by the cultural capital of *Rolling Stone Magazine*. Despite the use of these written encounters with low-life stand-ins for the magazine's readers, his readership still may not be immediately interested in the campaign, and at least some sections of the political establishment which is now his beat will not accept the intrusion of the representative of a purportedly counter-cultural publication (however mainstream the magazine has since become):

In Washington all journalists dress like bank tellers – and those who don't have problems. Mister Nixon's press handlers, for instance, have made it ominously clear that I shall *not* be given White House press credentials. The first time I called, they said they'd never heard of *Rolling Stone*. ‘Rolling what?’ said the woman. (Thompson, 1983: 42)

How the journalist dresses, as well as the name of the publication employing her or him, could be more important than a reader might have supposed. This is not the sort of issue that comes up often either in the straight press's coverage of politics, or the underground press's coverage of the underground.

At Least Neo-Respectability

Yet it is important to remember that the Gonzo reporting collected in *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* represented more than an example of perhaps

popular but essentially irrelevant niche coverage. As Thompson notes in the introduction:

Not long after McGovern's breakthrough victory in the Wisconsin primary, arch-establishment mouthpiece Stewart Alsop went out of his way to quote some of my more venomous comments on Muskie and Humphrey in his *Newsweek* column, thus raising me to the level of at least neo-respectability at about the same time McGovern began to look like a winner. (Thompson, 1983: 19)

This was national coverage of a national election, and, under scrutiny as an at least moderately prominent part of the semi-mythical 'national conversation', Gonzo was playing for the same high stakes as everyone else, in edgeworking terms.

To say that Gonzo was accepted as political journalism during the 1972 elections is, of course, a simplification. The coverage supplied did not have the same audience numbers, status or respectability as *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal* or the television news networks, but then again, no two news outlets ever occupy exactly the same cultural position. The point here is that the status, and influence, of Thompson's coverage of the election in some ways moved beyond 'the underground' or 'the hippies', or whatever term is most convenient for the counter-culture, the marginalised, or whoever then composed the core readership of *Rolling Stone Magazine*. It is perhaps worth noting here that however marginal his national readership, Gonzo was already popular reading for Thompson's journalistic peers:

Every reporter in my newsroom read *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and the book was passed around, ending up in my custody, scarred with underlining, dog-eared pages, and human bite marks. It spoke to the role Hunter S. Thompson played in our lives and in our feelings about what we did. (McKeen, 2012a: 9)

Within the text of *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, and in the contemporary account of the press corps' coverage of the campaign, *The Boys on the Bus*, produced by fellow *Rolling Stone* staff-writer Timothy Crouse, there is evidence of

Thompson's Gonzo coverage having an impact, and gaining a certain respect and respectability, albeit of a very peculiar nature.

Commenting on how other journalists received a particularly exuberantly cynical diatribe published by Thompson, Crouse observed:

That was without a doubt the most passionate piece of writing that the campaign produced, and more than a few men on the plane probably agreed with it and would have liked to have written it themselves. But they were also keenly aware that you could not sway millions of Middle Americans by sneering at used car dealers. Thompson had the luxury of a limited audience. He could say what he liked because he was talking to his own people. No matter how much the other reporters envied Thompson's freedom, they also resented him for not having to play by the rules ... He did not have to learn the very dangerous skill of balancing honesty with tact. The others did. (Crouse, 2003: 318)

So Thompson wasn't one of the 'heavies' and, in a sense, his creative freedom came with a limited audience, and thus a limited impact, or so it would seem. I would argue, however, that some incidents from the campaign seem to demonstrate that theorising Thompson's possible sphere of influence within the discourses surrounding the election is more complicated than necessarily comes across in Crouse's summary of how the other journalists thought of Thompson. The two most prominent incidents in this respect are probably the Muskie allegations regarding the drug Ibogaine, and the 'Boohoo' incident on the Sunshine Special. These incidents illustrate that in certain circumstances, Thompson the Gonzo journalist did things (intentionally or not) with his freedom that transcended the (possible) handicap of his limited audience.

Ibogaine is a real drug, as Hunter Thompson made clear with his use of an extract 'From a study by PharmChem Laboratories, Palo Alto, California' (Thompson, 1983: 150-1) which provides information on the drug's sources, history, dosage and effects, with which to premise his piece on 'the Ibogaine Effect as a serious factor in the Presidential Campaign' (Thompson, 1983: 151). Thompson's apparent allegation, in a

nutshell, was that Democratic hopeful Ed Muskie was abusing the drug Ibogaine while campaigning:

I immediately recognised The Ibogaine Effect – from Muskie's tearful breakdown on the flatbed truck in New Hampshire, the delusions and altered thinking that characterized his campaign in Florida, and finally the condition of 'total rage' that gripped him in Wisconsin. (Thompson, 1983: 151)

As previously discussed, the detailed examination of the peculiarities and weaknesses of Muskie's campaigning, through the explanatory lens of presumed Ibogaine abuse, was either a pseudo-journalistic literary conceit intended to illustrate (and/or ridicule) Muskie's public persona, or a hoax/lie/slander, depending of course entirely upon one's outlook.

While I previously examined some of the (American) roots of the tradition, such as it is, of making up implausible stories about public figures for political purposes, another interesting aspect of this particular story in terms of the examination of Gonzo and politics is that this fiction was believed, at least by some:

In a column on the Wisconsin primary, he claimed to have discovered that Muskie was taking an obscure Brazilian drug called Ibogaine, which accounted for the Senator's zombie-like performances on the stump. Many readers, including several journalists, believed this. So in subsequent articles, Hunter telegraphed his punches by writing, 'My God, why do I write crazy stuff like this?' at the end of each hoax. (Crouse, 2003: 316)

Journalists have lied and been believed before, but the strange thing here is that if a journalist was taken seriously enough to be believed when she said that a candidate for President was abusing a dangerous drug, one would assume that the consequences for (getting caught) making up something so scandalous would be dire. Careers were (and still are, from time to time) ended by much less serious infractions of journalistic standards, in much less significant areas of reporting. Thompson was read, quoted, and believed like a 'straight' journalist, at least some of the time, but apparently without taking on at least some of the usually attendant vulnerability to flak.

There is a power in such loopholes – it seems possible that the same reputation as a drug-user/expert which might make such a story seem plausible coming from Hunter Thompson, since he'd know and recognise the effects of drug use as well as anyone, also helped to nullify any possible backlash. It is also difficult to accuse a journalist of inaccuracy, or even outright lying, after he has published his intention not to be accurate:

Why not? With the truth so dull and depressing, the only working alternative is wild bursts of madness and filigree. Or fly off and write nothing at all: get a room on the edge of Chicago and shoot up for about sixteen straight days – then wander back to Washington with a notebook full of finely-honed insights on 'The Mood of the Midwest'. (Thompson, 1983: 93)

There was no mechanism of censure able to operate in these circumstances, because the writer was Hunter Thompson, known fabulist, and you believe a drug-freak who writes for *Rolling Stone* at your own risk, even if he's also a reporter who is covering Muskie's campaign for President of the USA, for a (hippie) national magazine. It is clear from this that the text is thus journalism, but not ordinary journalism, subject to the ordinary rules. By this, of course, I in some senses mean that it manifests within it the undecidable essence of Gonzo.

A key part of the way the myth of Gonzo is realised in such work is the use of the unusual, the unacceptable, and the unlikely, in order to allow the threads of the Text to move beyond their ordinary, prescribed locus with respect to the boundaries of conventional/dominant discourses of journalism. This is true of fiction/fantasy effects such as the Ibogaine incident, which exist entirely in the writing of the text, edgeworking conventional journalism, and it is also true of parts of the work where the actions of Thompson-the-character push the boundaries, and are then reported within the work, in a sense, edgeworking literary journalism, and/or creating literary

journalism about edgework. There is perhaps a fundamental, philosophical argument which might be made here about the rejection of hegemonic ideas and standards within society, as a pre-condition for critical thought. As Aldous Huxley phrased it:

A culture cannot be discriminatingly accepted, much less be modified, except by persons who have seen through it – by persons who have cut holes in the confining stockade of verbalized symbols and so are able to look at the world and, by reflection, at themselves in a new and relatively unprejudiced way. (Huxley, 1963: 2)

Before descending to this level of theoretical significance, however, it is important to consider Thompson-the-character's actions, as edgeworker, criminal and/or simple troublemaker, in terms of the specific professional standards in play. An example of such a Gonzo exploit at the edge, worthy of examination, is the incident aboard the 'Sunshine Special' campaign train. Strange and unlikely events transpired when Hunter Thompson (as character within the text, in this case doing something which is verifiably 'true') lent his press credentials to a man named (possibly) Peter Sheridan, who used them to pass as a member of the press aboard the train Muskie was using for whistle-stop campaigning in Florida.

Versions of the event were widely reported in the press:

Both the *Washington Star* and *Women's Wear Daily* reported essentially the same tale: A genuinely savage person had boarded the train in West Palm Beach, using a fraudulent press pass, then ran amok in the lounge car – getting in 'several fistfights' and finally 'heckling the Senator unmercifully' when the train pulled into Miami and Muskie went out on the caboose platform to deliver what was supposed to have been the climactic speech of his triumphant whistlestop tour. (Thompson, 1983: 107)

Thompson alleges that he lent this stranger his press-ticket partly because the man was freshly released from jail on a charge of vagrancy and needed transport to Miami, partly because the man claimed (convincingly) to be friends with a member of Muskie's staff, and at least partly due to some sense of boredom, malaise and/or disgust with covering

Muskie's tour of Florida, though he maintains that he did not realise or intend that the man would terrorise the train and then disrupt Muskie's speech:

There are very few members of the establishment press who will defend the idea that things like aggressive flatulence, forced feedings of swill, or even a barely-muted hostility on the part of the candidate would justify any kind of drastic retaliation by a *professional journalist* – and certainly nothing so drastic as to cause the Democratic front-runner to cut short a major speech because some dangerous freak wearing a press badge was clawing at his legs and screaming for more gin. (Thompson, 1983:114)

And very few professional journalists could get away with giving away their press credentials, with such disastrous consequences, without experiencing some disastrous consequences of their own, but once again it seems that the undefined nature of the category of 'Gonzo journalist' has some definite perks.

While in this case there were professional consequences for Thompson, they largely took the form of informal censure from his peers over allowing his credentials to fall into non-press hands (Thompson, 1983: 111), his becoming persona non grata with the Muskie campaign (which, admittedly, might have proved more serious had Muskie gone on to win the nomination) and a few enduring rumours that Thompson had been involved in an anti-Muskie conspiracy, either with Jerry Rubin and the Yippies or with Donald Segretti and CREEP (Thompson, 1983: 114). The main point here is not, however, that the peculiar status of Gonzo afforded Thompson unusual immunities, from such matters as the backlash from unsubstantiated hoaxes, or even from the most serious consequences of letting 'a serious, king-hell *Crazy*' (Thompson, 1983: 110) loose to terrorise press, staff and volunteers on the campaign train of a Democratic frontrunner, before heckling and attacking the candidate during an important speech. The main point is, rather, the way in which these excesses, so quintessentially Gonzo, can be seen to manifest the carnival – writing, and in the case of the 'Sunshine Special' incident, performing, the intrusion of dissident chaos into the sanctity of official, serious

order. Carnival, edgework and political activism all meet (ostensibly accidentally) in these misbegotten 'pranks'.

That being said, however, even for Thompson there is more to the edge than writing about it. In terms of edgework and political campaigning, in an interview the transcript of which is included near the end of *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, he says: 'That actually isn't much fun, writing about it ... the High is in the participation, and particularly if you identify with one candidate I don't think that I could do it if I didn't care who won' (Thompson, 1983: 496). He makes it clear that edgework reaches its highest plateaus in the excitement of politics, the highest stakes game there is. He also makes it clear that many of the most sophisticated strains of edgework, suitable, as it were, for the connoisseur, are inevitably bound up with the carnival – the repressed energy of the mass of the marginalised, and the possibility of channelling it into the game of politics.

Consider his answer when asked if politics represents the greatest, sharpest edge he's encountered:

That depends on what kind of campaign it is. I couldn't think of anything ... it'd be hard to imagine anything stranger or weirder or higher or closer to that Edge you're talking about than a flat-out Freak Power campaign for President of the United States. The energy you could put behind that ... the frenzy you'd stir up would probably get you killed, but Jesus Christ, it would be something that nobody'd ever forget. (Thompson, 1983: 495)

This ties back in to earlier points about Thompson as a political activist as well as a journalist. Though at one point he seems almost to apologise for his bias, admitting that towards the end of the campaign – 'In my case I became more of a flack for McGovern than ... than a journalist' (Thompson, 1983: 448) – this is perhaps more of an acknowledgement of how he measures up to the standards of journalistic practice at the time, rather than an expression of regret, or an endorsement of the kind of journalist he

supposedly should have been. Thompson was both journalist and activist, working at times on behalf of a political ideology and methodology called Freak Power, inaugurated in Thompson's campaigns in Aspen and evoked, here and there, within *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*. In understanding the Text of Gonzo political journalism Freak Power is an important concept, and its deployment in the 1972 campaign coverage both evokes and further illuminates both edgework, and Presdee's carnival.

In brief, the Freak Power Uprising, as evoked in Gonzo, referred to the election campaigns of Joe Edwards in 1969 and Hunter Thompson in 1970 in which they ran for the posts of mayor and sheriff, respectively, of Aspen, Colorado. Thompson says of the Uprising that it was motivated by a desire to have revenge on Larry O'Brien and the Democratic Party over O'Brien's failure to make Thompson Governor of American Samoa, a post which Thompson claims was promised to him. It is worth noting that Thompson writes that it was seizing the opportunity he saw to damage the Party in Aspen that led to the project of *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*: 'This took about fifteen months, and by the time it was done I was hopelessly hooked again on the politics of vengeance. The next step would have to be national' (Thompson, 1983: 227). Freak Power was narrowly defeated, twice, but what characterised the campaigns was the attempt to mobilise the politically apathetic 'Freak Vote' in Aspen, where Thompson lived and where there were enough resident freaks that, in theory, there was a viable support base for such a campaign, aimed at 'Freaks, heads, criminals, anarchists, beatniks, poachers, wobblies, bikers and persons of weird persuasion' (Thompson, 1980: 183).

Thompson was the de facto campaign manager for Edwards' bid to be elected mayor, running on a platform that was hippie-friendly, but primarily focussed on making things as difficult as possible for real estate developers. After Edwards lost by six votes, Thompson wrote an article about the campaign for *Rolling Stone*, entitled *Freak Power in the Rockies*. Unsurprisingly, given that Thompson the journalist was in this case also the campaign manager for one side, (and that he was also still himself,) it is not a good example of objective political journalism. The lead establishes from the very start an 'us and them' structure which is maintained throughout the piece: 'Two hours before the polls closed we realised that we had no headquarters – no hole or great hall where the faithful could gather for the awful election-night deathwatch. Or to celebrate the great victory that suddenly seemed very possible' (Thompson, 1980: 162). Political journalism and political activism don't get any more complexly mixed and entangled than within this piece. In addition to reportage about Edwards, the article also launched Thompson's campaign for sheriff. It outlines the 'Freak Power' campaign playbook, ideologically and methodologically, for dissidents from outside the mainstream who nonetheless wish to try to run for public office, not as an exercise in noble foolishness or consciousness-raising, but to win.

I do not intend to examine *Freak Power in the Rockies* at length here, mostly because although it is literary journalism of a sort, it lacks many of the distinctive features of Gonzo journalism and reads more like a mixture of campaign diary and conventional political essay. I include it because *Freak Power* is important, in *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, and elsewhere, in confirming that Thompson's political philosophy, as espoused and enacted in Gonzo, was not purely cynical and purely critical, without offering any alternatives or taking any action. Some critics read the political viewpoint of Gonzo as perhaps entirely negative:

Thompson's political writing aimed not to overturn the existing order but to shift *the image* of the system forever by associating politics not with noble endeavour and fair debate but with everything that debased the mind and body: drug addiction, gambling and deadly parasites. Tying these together is a nexus of compulsion, enslavement and corruption. One is addicted to chemicals or one bets on a sport obsessively, at the expense of wealth, health and personal relationships; one's cells are attacked by rapacious predators or opportunistic infections; or one participates in politics. The body invaded, for Thompson, is both the individual body and the body politic; human beings and the nations they inhabit are corrupted alike by a system that has become rotten. (Stephenson, 2012: 96)

Let me be clear – I think that Stephenson's assessment is, for the most part, useful and well-founded in the Text, particularly in that Thompson does repeatedly draw parallels between bodily pollution and political corruption, in his continual efforts to return all things cerebral to all things visceral. I also feel, however, that it is important to note that Thompson did not necessarily choose associating the system with debasement over attempting radical action against the existing order, simply because Thompson did not see those operations as mutually exclusive.

There is a positive, proactive, perhaps even optimistic side to Thompson's political activism within the Gonzo Text, for all his disgusted cynicism, and it is an important aspect of the Text of political Gonzo. Thompson railed against the corruption of the American body politic, not because he saw this corruption as inevitable, but precisely because he didn't; because he considered the squandered opportunity represented by mainstream American politics to be truly tragic:

The tragedy of all this is that George McGovern, for all his mistakes and all his imprecise talk about 'new politics' and 'honesty in government', is one of the few men who've run for President of the United States in this century who really understands what a fantastic monument to all the best instincts of the human race this country might have been, if we could have kept it out of the hands of greedy little hustlers like Richard Nixon. (Thompson, 1983: 414)

The frustrated awareness of the possibility that America could be better than the wasteland Gonzo so often depicts is an important aspect of Thompson's writing, and of his activism. The Freak Power Uprising wasn't just intended to provide the subject

matter for an article, or even to prove a point; it was intended to wrest control of Aspen, a place Thompson loved living in, from the hands of greedy developers, and to do so using the power of the other America, the drop-outs from conventional social structures, the carnival folk.

I haven't wanted to bring the concept of receptivity which I defined in the previous chapter into play in this discussion, since I feel that the parallel point is obvious, and not necessarily terribly helpful, on its face – that fundamentally all political journalism was impurely objective, and that the various corruptions and oddities which Gonzo introduced are, like the drug experiences previously considered, not, in fact alien to the system. The discussion of the roots of Gonzo within older journalistic ideologies, as well as the admiration and envy reportedly felt by other journalists for Gonzo's freedoms made a fairly clear implication, I think, that again, nothing truly 'foreign' is being introduced. The political discourses of journalism, though carefully protected and quarantined from corrupting impurities, of course have a receptivity to the excesses of Gonzo journalism. Gonzo pushes the boundaries, pushes the possibilities of these discourses, perhaps right to the edge of what might have been perceived as acceptable, but, fundamentally, the differences between Gonzo and other, more conventional reportage can be read as a matter of degrees of subjectivity, and degrees of honesty, although this was not necessarily how the straight reporters might have seen it.

Given the construction of receptivity already formulated in relation to drugs and journalism, and the examination of political Gonzo journalism which I intended, these points seemed largely superfluous, but there is something to be said for the inclusion of some of the points I made previously within a reading of Gonzo's socio-political commentary. Thompson wanted to see the incorporation of the conventionally

disenfranchised, and the largely demoralised and apathetic young, into the structures of American politics. Why else would one cover the 1972 campaign cycle for a magazine like *Rolling Stone* in the first place? Both his writing and his activism can be read as working, to some extent, toward that end. Additionally, there is an ideological kinship between the conception of receptivity manifested in the drug-related aspects of his writing and this political program, beyond the drug-use of those he was interested in mobilising, and beyond the political issue of drugs themselves. The concept at the heart of this is, I would argue, not corruption, directly, but inclusion. Thompson supported, in *Gonzo*, the patriotic (and Thompson was certainly that) belief that no Americans should be excluded from the political process just because they didn't fit into the mould of the traditional, two-party structures which were, and are, conventionally presented as the limits of American politics.

This myth of American politics as yet another closed system, sacrosanct, pure, and defined within non-porous boundaries – not unlike the healthy, sane, and sober body which I considered in the previous chapter – is not as conceptually stable, for Thompson, as might be suggested by its frequent depictions in culture. Thompson expresses disgust within *Gonzo* at the parade of mediocre post-Kennedy candidates, and especially at the defeat of McGovern, but never actual despair of the political process. The cynical anguish, and the cry for change, does not equate to an assumption that mainstream politics can never offer and never include anything different. There is perhaps an implicit optimism here, precisely because Thompson knows that there are people out there who are not included in the bleak, conventional picture:

And how many more of these stinking, double-downer sideshows will we have to go through before we can get ourselves straight enough to put together some kind of national election that will give me and the at least 20 million people I tend to agree with a chance to vote *for* something, instead of always being faced with that old familiar choice between the lesser of two evils? (Thompson, 1983: 56)

Thompson made it clear, in the political manifestations of the concept of Gonzo journalism, that this 'purity' of the Democrat/Republican, fundamentally conservative (in the sense of 'not revolutionary'), unchanging and largely unchangeable political landscape was, in fact, depressingly full to the brim with bullshit and pus (the 'gross' imagery is apt).

He also made it clear, however, that this system was not remotely as impenetrable (or as complete a picture) as the powers that be would have had his readers think. There is perhaps ample cause for despair, and Thompson expresses the anguish he feels at Nixon's impending victory with eloquent force:

This may be the year when we finally come face to face with ourselves; finally just lay back and say it – that we are really just a nation of 220 million used car salesmen with all the money we need to buy guns, and no qualms at all about killing anybody else in the world who tries to make us uncomfortable. (Thompson, 1983: 413-4)

This is not, however, as straightforwardly hopeless as it seems – it was written, after all, before the election, trying, perhaps, to fight against a Republican landslide that had generally been conceded as inevitable. The point of this rage is that it might be possible for American politics to take another path, somehow, sometime. You can sneak a rumour or a fantasy into the journalism, or a mad acid-freak onto a candidate's train, or, almost, perhaps, a hippie into power in Aspen. Apparent dangers and impossibilities might be illusory – the American political landscape might be able to absorb its rejects more like a drug than like the poison the establishment expected. Working the edges, and invoking the power of the anger, boredom, hedonism, subversion and excess of carnival, Gonzo seems to suggest that there is a possibility that there might be receptivity where there appears to be only elitist repression; that it might be possible, given the right set and setting, for American politics to have a good trip, under the influence of Freak Power.

Chapter Three - Media Sports are Decadent and Depraved

'I got nothing personal against Thompson', he told another NFL player who happened to be skiing in Aspen at the time: 'But let's face it, we've got nothing to gain by talking to him. I've read all his stuff and I know how he is; he's a goddamn lunatic – and you've got to be careful with a bastard like that, because no matter how hard he tries, he just can't help but tell the truth'.

When I heard that I just sort of slumped down on my bar-stool and stared at myself in the mirror ... wishing, on one level, that Keating's harsh judgement was right ... but knowing, on another, that the treacherous realities of the worlds I especially work in forced me to abandon the purist stance a long time ago. (Thompson 1980: 77-8)

Focussing on counter-culture, drugs, subjectivity, politics, and other 'heavy' issues of cultural politics and literary journalism, it is almost possible to forget that Hunter Thompson was, perhaps primarily (if that means anything), a sportswriter. Gonzo journalism itself began in a story on the Kentucky Derby, although that is not a piece of writing that fulfils the contemporary conventions of sports journalism in an obvious sense. Both the focal points and the boundaries of the world of sports journalism may perhaps be considered as in some sense both less explicitly and more arbitrarily defined than the parameters of some other journalistic beats. In this context, it is possible to consider Hunter Thompson's Gonzo sports pieces as, again, renegotiating such conventions as the genre possesses, both in terms of questioning what the focus should be for journalism about sport, and at the same time investigating the possibility of widening the socio-political context of sports journalism, far beyond the conventional limits of the 'sports-world'.

This is not to suggest, I should add, that Gonzo holds, or even held at its inception, exclusive rights to writing subjectively about sport, in terms of wider social and cultural contexts. Reflexive analysis is a recognisable, established mode of sports journalism in which:

... the reflexive writer questions his or her relationship with sport, psychologically, morally and economically to reveal the way in which sport operates in our culture and society. It is quite rare for this form of writing to appear in the sports pages and it is more likely found within different sections of a newspaper, either in a review section or magazine. (Boyle & Haynes, 2000: 176)

I intend to demonstrate here that, perhaps unsurprisingly, while Gonzo journalism is reflexive, Gonzo sports journalism is not fully explicated by this mode. Gonzo's radical subjectivity goes beyond this level of reflexivity, and in Gonzo sports journalism Gonzo methods are used to illuminate some of the harsher realities and less innocuous ideologies of the world of sports. This critical approach is, however, balanced (perhaps the better word would be 'interwoven') with a subjectively evoked understanding of and appreciation for the emotional appeals and symbolic compensations offered by the consumption of sport.

In at least one formulation, the figure of the American sportswriter which first emerges in the period of the late 19th to early 20th century, can be considered as related to the journalistic method or stance or style of overt subjectivity:

From the outset, sportswriters in the US were differentiated from mere sports reporters or journalists by their ability, and licence, to place themselves at the centre of the story, rather than merely report the facts and figures associated with a sporting contest. The reader was under no illusion that what you were reading was an interpretation of an event through the eyes of the sportswriter. (Boyle, 2006: 32-3)

Though this illustrates a possible journalistic tradition through which to begin to contextualise the birth of Gonzo in terms of the history of American sports journalism, Gonzo is not the same creature as the literary journalism of the pioneer American sportswriters. It is the case that Thompson-the-character can be seen as expressing again and again subjective impressions of sport and the sports-related, not just as a journalist (and tipster/gambler), but also as a sports fan, as ever lacking pretensions of objectivity or even a semblance of detachment. He is also often the centre of the story, as with

Boyle's formula. While there are similarities, however, the radical subjectivity of Gonzo sports journalism – in terms of both sporting and political partiality, narrative digressions and, in short, the bulk of the methods in the Gonzo toolbox – operates very differently from the dramatic, emotive, but ideologically circumscribed first-person narratives of the early sportswriters.

Gonzo sports journalism is, simply, very different from conventional sports journalism. This remains true though a different set of standards for sports journalists mean that Thompson-the-character is, or should be, somewhat less out of place on a personal level, than he is, for example, among political reporters on the White House beat: 'Make no mistake. For all those regular intrusions by harsh, unforgiving reality, sports journalism is still for the juvenile at heart, the fun-lovers and the thrill-seekers, the romantics and the idealists' (Steen, 2008: 9). Thompson-the-character reports his own passion for sports, albeit at times with measures of revulsion, cynicism or even self-disgust, but again, as we have seen in the case of the Gonzo coverage of politics, not as a dispassionate observer. Though the sportswriter is expected to be passionate, (s)he is not expected to allow that passion to interfere with the objectivity which Gonzo abrogates: 'For all the impartiality it requires, this is no more a job you can do dispassionately than a job you can do blindfold' [sic] (Steen, 2008: 9). Thompson explores the perceptible gaps between the ideals and values ostensibly and explicitly evoked and manifested within the mythologies of sport, and the corruptions, commercial and otherwise, which (arguably) characterise the business of media sport, in practice. Generally speaking, impartiality is not even formally attempted – it is irrelevant.

Sports journalism has a tradition of placing considerable emphasis on providing not just results – who won and who lost and what the final score was – but also on providing a wealth of statistical minutiae, historical and contemporary, on teams, players, leagues, traditions and traditional events (Koppett, 1994: 137-143). This trend is perhaps especially relevant in the American context, in which some of the prominence of sport within popular culture has always been tied to narrativity and historical context, even without recourse to the tribal/communal identities of ‘fandom’:

For a nation as vast, as diverse and – crucially – as young as the United States, sport acquired an even more onerous responsibility: creating history. Sportswriting there, about boxing and baseball especially, acquired a cache and credibility unmatched elsewhere. (Steen, 2008: 29)

It is important to note here that there may be a significant difference between sports *as history* – much emphasised in discourses around sport – and the idea of placing sports in context *as a part of history*. While there is a tradition of placing a sporting story or event in the context of a sports narrative, there is also a tradition of limiting the context of any given story, to a certain extent, to within the boundaries of the sport in question.

Baseball, for example, within the conventional boundaries of American sports culture, is certainly considered as *having* both a history and a self-identifying but still identifiable community. This is perhaps a key feature of the cultural existence of a sport, particularly with reference of the nature of sport as it is constructed by and for ‘fans’:

Mediated versions of sport are one of the key areas of culture which give us a sense of a lived history. One of the particular appeals of sport, for both the media and supporters, is the extent to which the narratives or stories which surround sport act as a bridge between the present and the past. Sporting events need to have a history and a longevity to feel important. (Boyle and Haynes, 2000: 22)

The extent to which the game is culturally considered as being a part of wider socio-cultural contexts, complexly integrated and interrelated with ‘outside’ forces, trends,

conflicts etc., rather than solely as a largely independent world-unto-itself, is itself deceptively complicated.

The sports world is a 'real' world in American culture, but the ways in which it is part of the rest of the real world, and the nature of the traffic back and forth over the imagined border between 'sports' and the rest of reality, are transcribed and delimited by ideological frames of reference. Sports journalists, and other sports enthusiasts for that matter, often maintain that sport is as 'real' as real gets:

As sportswriters, it is certainly real to our subjects, and those devoted to their fortunes. Boxers die in the ring; fans kill themselves over a disappointing result, or assault officials; corners are cut and rules flagrantly bent. Where, pray, does 'real' life differ? (Steen, 2008: 16)

It is important to note, however, that this typical and typically impassioned plea is based on an assertion that sports *are* a (subjective) reality, not that that reality is a part of a larger one. Where, pray, does 'real' life intrude? The mythology of sport, as self-contained reality and as idealised field of honest competition, is presented in Gonzo as yet another system which invokes a culturally constructed 'purity'. Like objectivity or politics or sobriety, here we are presented with an implicitly sanctified concept which, conventionally, we are given to believe has at least the possibility of being pure and perfect, uncorrupted by anything which does not belong, by anything which should be kept, to use a peculiar yet familiar phrase, 'outside the world of sport'. As with those other mythic purities, Thompson evokes the myth, but the Gonzo Text does not uncritically reproduce its imagined purity, by any stretch.

This approach to ideas of sport is of course complicated, in the Gonzo Text and elsewhere in American culture, by the ways in which the ideas of sport in America comprise a myth system with significant interrelationships with key American ideologies. 'Pure' sport is tied to dominant ideas of morality, work, social interaction,

conceptions of the individual, of the body, and on and on and on. In *Contesting The Super Bowl*, a text which is highly critical of the institutional character of the NFL, Dona Schwartz describes the essentially conformist, reactionary nature of the traditional 'sports creed':

Sport builds character; those who participate are clean-cut, upstanding, wholesome. Team sports teach loyalty and altruism, absorbing the individual into the corporate body. ('There is no 'I' in team'.) Sports inculcate respect for discipline; team members appreciate the need for external authority and social control, embodied in coaches, the front office, and the league ... Anyone can attain these positive results because sport recognises athletic ability, not social class – sport is democratic. Play at sports produces physical fitness, the development and maintenance of a healthy body, and by extension, the vigor to lead. Sports inculcate mental fitness ... Athletic events begin with the national anthem, proclaiming their nationalism, and the flag waves prominently overhead. Adherence to the creed yields success – teams governed by these precepts chalk-up more wins, a testimonial to God and country. (Schwartz, 1998: 98)

All of this is deployed as axiomatic within mainstream American culture, and sport is considered as important in the enculturation of young Americans. Gonzo's subversive and dissident character can perhaps be read as in some senses setting up Gonzo sports journalism for an inevitable collision with dominant myths of sport. It is important to remember that while these myths may seem, from certain perspectives, less weighty than the matters at stake in professional election coverage, they can be considered as underpinning both the practice of conventional sports journalism, and indeed, the conventional understanding of sport itself, and its myriad ideological deployments within American society and culture.

For Gonzo, the appeal of sports, and the best approach to sports journalism, has very little to do with the production of clean-cut conformists, or in the reproduction of myths of meritocracy, altruism and team spirit. Contextual information that facilitates hard-edged social commentary, critiques of big money sports' hyper-commercialisation of sporting competition, and the deconstruction of sports journalists' 'professionalism', are

all prominent aspects of Gonzo journalism's encounter with the idea of 'sport'. It is important to note, however, that Gonzo does more than 'cover' sport. Gonzo sports journalism, as specifically 'sports journalism', is able to interact with the conventions of the sub-genre of writing, in addition to engaging with 'sport' as subject matter. Gonzo sports journalism can be considered as more than just Gonzo journalism which deals with sports, but as a significant sub-category in itself. Examining some of the prominent works comprising this set offers the opportunity both to explore the specific nature of the category, and to investigate the ways in which the theories and ideas developed in the previous chapters can be usefully applied to reading Gonzo's constructions of sport.

In this chapter, I examine three articles which were written by Hunter Thompson concerning sports-related topics – one profile of a retired sporting champion, one piece primarily concerned with the social dimensions of the Kentucky Derby horse-race, and one on the Super Bowl. The approach I employ in this chapter may read somewhat differently than that of the previous chapters, in that the focus of my argument to some extent shifts away from the construction of a theoretical framework through which to consider the Gonzo Text. Although, of course, that is still very much at issue, and theorising the specific contexts of the standards and practices of 'sports journalism' remains crucial, here I move towards a more tightly focussed close-reading of these articles.

This examination, looking more at the textual as well as the Textual features in play, employs many of the ideas which I have been advancing, such as formulations of professionalism, edgework, journalistic standards & Gonzo methods, and, of course and particularly, receptivity. In this way I aim to provide a reading of these works which will illuminate the nature of Gonzo sports journalism, while at the same time

demonstrating the critical utility of the framework I have been developing, in order to construct readings of both Gonzo works and the wider Gonzo Text. For such a purpose, ‘sport’ is perhaps the ideal theme of Gonzo with which to engage, in that it is an interesting sub-genre of journalism, an important aspect of American ideology, and a prominent feature of the landscapes of American culture, entertainment and business. It is even a world with edgeworkers (Lyng, 1990) and other problematic professionals, journalistic and otherwise, as well as its own specific ‘drug problems’ (Stewart and Smith, 2008). It is thus ideal for focussing in on the details of individual works, as writing as well as as sports journalism, without losing sight of the ‘big picture’ – the wider themes and processes of the Gonzo Text.

A Very Hard Dollar

Regarding Thompson's constructions of the imagined purity of sport, and its receptivity to nominally rejected influences, it is in some respects particularly illuminating to consider the text of the appropriately-titled *The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy*. In this profile piece on the champion skier, considerable emphasis is placed on examining the commercial exploitation of sporting fame, which is a prominent aspect of Thompson's critique of myths of sport. Before beginning to look at approaches to untangling this piece, however, I should perhaps mention that it is possible to argue that the piece is not necessarily an example of Gonzo journalism, depending of course on how Gonzo is defined. This is arguable, principally, from two perspectives. Firstly, and comparatively unimportantly, it was published 3 months and 3 issues of *Scanlan's Monthly* before the ‘official’ birth of Gonzo in the publication of *The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent And Depraved* (which will be examined elsewhere in this chapter). Secondly, *The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy* does not necessarily contain some of the features,

stylistic and otherwise, which are associated with Gonzo e.g. the incorporation of elements that overtly fall outside conventions of non-fiction, or the use of text which is labelled as direct transcription of recordings or notes. That being said, I believe that this piece can profitably be examined in the context of Gonzo, and it is perhaps also worth noting that not all Thompson scholars view this work as lacking the necessary features to make it 'Gonzo'. In his analysis of Thompson's early literary journalism, Reynolds observes that 'There are several small indications in the Killy piece that we have crossed the Rubicon into Gonzo territory, and that there can be no turning back' (2012: 76). He goes on to point to unusual uses of rhetoric and outlandish imagery within the piece and assert that 'This is the hallmark of Gonzo, what makes it exciting and fresh, and supplies that frisson to the reader of, "Oh my, you can get away with saying this in journalism?"' (2012: 76)

In any case, the argument that analysing this article as Gonzo journalism can be justified simply by virtue of its inclusion in the collection *The Great Shark Hunt*, rendering it in a sense Gonzo-by-association, and labelling it as such, might well seem sufficient from a certain perspective. Much more useful for my purposes, however, are some of the discernible continuities between this piece and later sports-writing by Thompson which is perhaps more solidly Gonzo in style, content and methodology. What I mean by this is that while the piece may be read in itself as part of a wider Gonzo Text, there are elements in *The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy* which, in the context of a kind of proto-Gonzo status, may usefully illustrate some of the sources of Gonzo's essential character within Thompson's later writings. The key thematic to consider from this viewpoint is, I would argue, the intersection between Thompson-the-narrator's performed subjectivity, and the deployment of wider social, political and cultural context(s) in order to frame the 'sporting' phenomenon which occupies the official

spotlight of *The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy*. From this perspective it is possible to consider the place of the piece, and its examination of the interaction between corporate business interests and a famous, formerly amateur athlete, within the study of Gonzo journalism's methods, themes and contexts. There is a complex, perhaps even somewhat ambivalent evocation of the mythical tension between the commercial, mercenary aspects of sport, and the myths of glory and accomplishment which conventionally surround it.

Those who consider sport in the context of business are often at pains to stress that the rewards for athletic excellence cannot be reduced purely to commercial terms, even if those terms are ultimately indispensable in a capitalist society:

This is not to suggest that emotional sentiment or the desire to win championships or titles do not play their part in motivating contemporary elite sports men and women, rather, we are merely pointing out that the financial capitalization of an athlete's star potential and worth are foremost in the development of their professional careers. (Boyle and Hoynes, 2000: 101)

It can be problematic to try to reconcile the observable interactions between money and sport with the myths which construct the sole motivation of sportspeople as the heroic pursuit of excellence for its own sake. These kind of tensions are invoked in this piece, but are not presented in a simplistically judgemental framework. A sense of the debasement of human potential, of the chasm between a corrupt cultural world and the possibility of some kind of human utopia, is a prominent theme in later Gonzo writings, such as *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, and is perhaps the central theme of Thompson's profile on Jean-Claude Killy: 'the world's greatest skier, now retired at age twenty-six with three Olympic gold medals, a fistful of golden contracts, a personal manager and ranking-celebrity status on three continents' (Thompson, 1980: 85). The discussion of Killy's commercial and personal life as a sports celebrity is,

however, considerably more complex than a simplistic damnation of his ‘temptations’, and the system that they represent.

The opening to the piece describes Thompson's arrival in Boston, unwilling to try to meet with Killy that night, already too exhausted from his efforts to complete the assignment:

‘I can't handle it tonight’, I said. ‘I've been chasing all over the country for ten days on this thing: Chicago, Denver, Aspen, Salt Lake City, Sun Valley, Baltimore. Now Boston and tomorrow New Hampshire. I'm supposed to ride up there with them tonight on the Head Ski bus, but I'm not up to it; all those hired geeks with their rib-ticklers. Let's have a drink, then I'll cancel out on the bus trip’. (Thompson, 1980: 84)

The complaining about a busy travel schedule, in the context of keeping up with Killy's nationwide promotional tour for Head Ski, might seem a comparatively mundane way in to such a profile, but in a sense Thompson is laying the foundation, at the outset, for the piece's main focus. The reader is first presented with the figure of Killy ‘looking fatigued and wretchedly uncomfortable’ (Thompson, 1980: 85) in the midst of a small gathering of Head Ski dealers, and his out-of-place-ness in this comparatively petty business environment remains, in a way, the subject throughout.

Thompson signals this viewpoint and this emphasis early on by disclosing his own feelings at seeing Killy there: ‘I was never quite sure about Killy, never knowing if he understood why I was embarrassed *for him* in those scenes’ (Thompson, 1980: 85). Thompson communicates his own subjective discomfort, and then reinforces the sense of wry pathos with the repeated testimony of a fellow witness: ‘Outside in the hallway, Cardoso erupted with laughter. “What an incredible scene! What was he *doing* with those bums?”’ (Thompson, 1980: 85) Through the use of such methods, the first scenes of the article can be seen as providing a suitable introduction to the central ideas of the

piece, which will deal with the complexities of the contrast between the athletic heroism of Killy the great skier, and the commercial exploitation of Killy the effective salesman.

I am not attempting, however, to endorse a reading of *The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy* which would ignore the irony of the invocation of Christian mythologies of sin and corruption in the title. It would be unhelpful, I think, to consider the piece as uncomplicatedly damning either poor, tempted Killy, or even as unequivocally damning the marketplace in which the cachet of his accomplishments is commodified. The scope of the piece, and of the contexts into which the discussion of Killy's commercial activities are placed, goes well beyond the kind of romantic idealisation of sport which would be required in order to cast Killy in the mythic role of sportsman-saint, locked in epic battle over the profanation of the heroic sanctity of skiing more quickly than anyone else in the world. Looking within the context of the sport of skiing itself, in relation to the International Olympic Movement, Thompson displays little sympathy for those who are rigidly puritanical about sport, as for example, in the context of the controversial accusations made regarding Killy's amateur status during the years of his Olympic career.

Avery Brundage, President of the International Olympic Committee, publicly called for several champions of the 1968 Winter Games to return their gold medals on the grounds that they had violated the Olympic code of strict amateurism. Thompson describes both Brundage's allegations and Killy's pseudo-amateurism with, if not an overt sympathy for the slow death of the myth of amateurism in sport, at least a certain respect for the notion that the erosion of the amateur code in the Olympic context is, at this point, a fait accompli. Thompson clearly implies the disconnect between Brundage's ideas and the contemporary realities of Olympic competition, characterising the man as 'a tunnel-

visioned purist of the old school' (Thompson, 1980: 92), and tacitly supporting the hypocrisy of Killy's 'amateurism':

During most of his career on the French ski team he was listed, for publicity reasons, as a government-employed Customs inspector. Nobody believed it, not even the officials of the Fédération Internationale de Ski (FIS), the governing body for world-class ski competition. The whole idea was absurd. Who, after all, could believe that the reigning world ski champion – a hero/celebrity whose arrival in any airport from Paris to Tokyo drew crowds and TV cameras – was actually supporting himself on a salary gleaned from his off-season efforts in some dreary shed at Marseilles? (Thompson, 1980: 91)

If anything, as we shall see, Thompson seems to express sympathy for Killy, who, amateur career over with, now 'doesn't mind admitting that he views the whole game as a fraud and a folly' (Thompson, 1980: 91)¹³.

This presentation of Killy's honesty about his former dishonesty is closely tied to Thompson's apparent contempt for the hypocritical maintenance of the myth of amateurism, which he links, thematically, with the deployment of mythologies of sport in the commercial context:

You don't even admit that the French Government paid you to be a skier because things are done that way in France and most other countries, and nobody born after 1900 calls it anything but natural ... when you sell Chevrolets in America you honour the myths and mentality of the marketplace: You smile like Horatio Alger and give all the credit to Mom and Dad, who never lost faith in you and even mortgaged their ingots when things got tough. (Thompson, 1980: 92)

Within this type of context it would seem there is no point to criticising the functioning of a system of sport, business and media in which commercial interests will 'naturally' impact the equipment, training, careers, and lives, of any and all sports 'personalities' whose media profile can carry value in the marketplace.

¹³ For a perhaps more balanced riposte, though not one directly relevant here, Allen Guttman's biography of Avery Brundage contains a detailed, wide-ranging account of various aspects of Brundage's passionate, life-long devotion to sporting amateurism (1983: 115-131).

In 'the world of sport' in America, it is mythically implied that while the rewards of athletic excellence will be competitively apportioned on the basis of market value, the initial struggle for that excellence is affected by talent and drive only, with material resources 'naturally' irrelevant:

It was also a world characterised not by any class-based elitism but, rather, by a meritocratic ethos in which, if you had the talent and worked hard, anyone could be the champion and enjoy the financial rewards that the increasingly commercial professional world of US sport offered. (Boyle, 2006: 36)

This meritocratic aspect of the American myths of sport would seem irreconcilable with illicit sponsorship, but it seems clear in this piece that the point is not that the public enjoys a general ignorance of the material conditions of 'amateurism', but more that this aspect of sport is ignored, as not in keeping with the mythic structures which infuse mediated sport with its appeals to viewers/fans. Given this lack of emphasis, but a tacit public understanding nonetheless that amateurism is an absurd fiction in the first place, and that endorsements and duplicitous Government funding are par for the course, then that would seem to beg the question – what's so bad about retiring to promote Chevrolets for a living?

Highlighting the hypocrisy of the construction of 'amateur status' is not the only way in which Thompson's choices regarding the wider contexts into which to place Kilby can be seen as in some sense sympathetic. Thompson's editorialising seems carefully to avoid rendering what would be an essentially superficial characterisation of Kilby as a contemptible figure of pure avarice. The narrative voice of the piece seems to be at pains to contextualise and justify the final, essentially benign judgement of Kilby:

He is a handsome middle-class French boy who trained hard and learned to ski so well that now his name is immensely saleable on the marketplace of a crazily inflated culture-economy that eats its heroes like hotdogs and honours them on about the same level. (Thompson, 1980: 103)

Despite Killy's unapologetically single-minded dedication to the most thorough exploitation possible of his achievements, such judgement as Thompson renders can be read as far from harsh.

Rather, Thompson uses the wider contexts of American culture with particular reference to forms of PR culture, the commercial exploitation of skiing and, indeed, the media construction of 'heroes', in order to explain why, in the circumstances:

On balance, it seems unfair to dismiss him as a witless greedhead, despite all the evidence. Somewhere behind that wistful programmed smile I suspect there is something akin to what Norman Mailer once called (speaking of Jim Jones) 'an animal sense of who has the power'. There is also a brooding contempt for the *American* system that has made him what he is. Killy doesn't understand this country; he doesn't even like it – but there is no question in his mind about his own proper role in a scene that is making him rich. (Thompson, 1980: 103)

Explaining and to some extent implicitly blaming the American system is a feature of the piece rhetorically employed not just to contextualise Killy's money-making, but also to minimise any scorn or negative judgement of Killy as an individual, despite the denigration of his commercial activities as implicitly, perhaps inherently corrupting.

Killy's promotional work is placed in the context of the rise of skiing as a mass-market, middle-class leisure pursuit in America, and of this booming ski industry's use of the international sport of competitive skiing within its marketing strategies. Placing the controversy around Killy, and others, in context, Guttmann notes that by this point, for the International Olympic Committee, 'The problem of endorsements became especially acute among world-class skiers as their sport became increasingly popular and ski manufacturers fought for a share in the lucrative market' (Guttmann, 1983: 125). Within the broader context of such a widespread and well-funded trend, Killy is thus perhaps viewed more as a pawn of strong market forces than as one who has been corrupted by the 'temptations' of selling out to corporate America, at least from some perspectives.

Thompson's account of Killy's self-commodification ties in with this industrial context, implicitly reinforcing the assumption that the forces (almost) harassing Killy into capitalising on his bankable notoriety were all but irresistible:

The wave of the future crashed down on him within hours after his disputed grand slalom victory over Karl Schranz of Austria. Suddenly they were on him – a chattering greenback swarm of agents, money-mongers and would-be 'personal reps' of every shape and description ... Jean-Claude listened, shrugged, then ducked out for a while – to Paris, the Riviera, back home to Val d'Isère – and finally, after weeks of half-heartedly dodging the inevitable, signed with McCormack. The only sure thing in the deal was a hell of a lot of money, both sooner and later. Beyond that, Killy had no idea what he was getting into. (Thompson, 1980: 90)

Killy's position is, from a certain perspective, enviable, in that he will certainly become very rich, but Thompson is keen to assert that this process isn't Killy's idea – that it's barely even his choice¹⁴.

Thompson observes that the 1960s saw a huge increase in middle-class spending on leisure pursuits with the result, among other things, of a boom in skiing:

Skiing is no longer an esoteric sport for the idle rich, but a fantastically popular new winter status-game for anyone who can afford \$500 for equipment. Five years ago the figure would have been three times that, plus another loose \$1000 for a week at Stowe or Sun Valley, but now, with the advent of snow-making machines, even Chatanooga is a 'ski-town'. (Thompson, 1980: 95)

Killy became the first great hero of the sport, just as (or soon after) the sport became a big money industry in America. It is not, in a sense, Killy's fault, Thompson seems to plead, that: 'It was the prominence of Jean-Claude Killy (as a hot racer in 1966 and as a press hero in 67 and 68) that suddenly gave skiing an image' (Thompson, 1980: 95).

¹⁴ For a brief but illuminating account of how the agent in question, Mark McCormack, created in Arnold Palmer the first sports celebrity to become a global brand-name, and in the process became perhaps the first sports super-agent, see Boyle and Haynes (2000: 93-6).

The outcome of this confluence is presented as obvious, according to the logic of the marketplace. Thompson uses the pseudo-inevitable character of the ski endorsements in order to contextualise Killy's comparatively complicated place in the landscape of the American car market – affixing European style to American Chevrolets:

The result was inevitable: a super-priced French import, tailored strictly for the fast-growing US leisure market, the same people who suddenly found themselves able to afford Porsches, Mercedes and Jaguars ... along with Mgs and Volkswagens ... So now we have a DeLorean-style blitz for Chevrolet, and it's doing beautifully ... The strategy has been simple enough: a heavy focus on speed, sporty styling and the 'youth market'. This explains Chevvy's taste for such image-makers as [O.J.] Simpson, Glen Campbell and Killy. (Thompson, 1980: 95)

It becomes sadly unavoidable that athletes and other popular heroes of any professional stripe should thus be commodified as marketing equipment. Thompson emphasises that the financially lucrative processes involved may not be arduous physical labour, but neither are they necessarily a walk in the park on the level of personality.

One of the interwoven avenues through which Thompson explores this theme within the piece is the choice to focus extensively on the mundane, boring, repetitious, over-scheduled, tiring *work* of being a paid shill, even a very highly paid one, mingling at endless awkward parties, or appearing at the Chicago auto show, employed to have, repeatedly, the same carefully rehearsed conversation:

J.-C.: 'Oh yes, that is my car, the new Z-28. It has seat covers made of Austrian ski sweaters. And you notice my special license plate, JCK ...'
Roller: 'That's fine. The important thing is to be spontaneous'.
J.-C. (puzzled): 'Spuen-tan-EUS?' (Thompson, 1980: 94)

It is little wonder, within the reality of the piece at least, that Killy is exhausted, distant, and even, on a more personal level, apparently unsympathetic.

Thompson's constructed context for Killy emphasises the possible subjective unpleasantness of being paid, albeit very well, to play the role of an automaton:

There was a hint of decency – perhaps even humour – about him, but the high-powered realities of the world he lives in now make it hard to deal with him on any terms except those of pure commerce. His handlers rush him from one scheduled appearance to the next; his time and priorities are parcelled out according to their dollar/publicity value; everything he says is screened and programmed. He often sounds like a prisoner of war, dutifully repeating his name, rank and serial number... (Thompson, 1980: 86)

Here, Killy seems like a victim of the American system, almost brutalised by it, perhaps even ‘brainwashed’, in a sense. This is not, however, from a certain perspective, particularly surprising, or even unusual.

The big-money sponsorship of sports is, after all, a commercial transaction in which maximising the possible return on the sponsor’s investment will often lead to pressure not just for success, but for sanitisation, conformism, and an emphasis on the uncontroversial:

What the sponsor gives, the sponsor can take away. Money tends to follow the successful high-profile sports. Image becomes all important [sic] to the sport, with its financial survival becoming dependant on its ability to attract favourable media coverage. As the sponsor becomes more important, the need to sanitize the televised image of the sport increases as does the desire to distance sports from anything which may be deemed political or controversial. (Boyle and Haynes: 2000: 62)

It is perhaps possible to view some of the dehumanising impact on Killy of corporate endorsement (a close relative of such sponsorship) in terms of this type of pressure. The ways in which sponsors exert pressure on a team to maintain an uncontroversial media profile, when translated to someone like Killy and the context of a full-time career as an endorser of products, will produce an automaton of a kind, since there is little room in the required media profile for anything personal or individual which is not a pre-scripted part of the Jean-Claude Killy ‘brand’.

Elsewhere in the piece Thompson also emphasises the role of the media, structurally, in producing Killy as an almost zombie-like figure, culturally, and even personally, as

dramatically illustrated by the problems Thompson encounters when trying to connect with the man on a personal level:

By this time I had disabused myself of the notion that we had any basic rapport; his habit-smiles were for people who asked habit-questions – fan-magazine bullshit and pulp philosophy: How do you like America? (It is truly wonderful. I would like to see it all in a Camaro.) How did it feel to win three gold medals in the Olympics? (It felt truly wonderful. I plan to have them mounted on the dashboard of my Camaro.) (Thompson, 1980: 101-2)

The American system, for which Thompson variously seems to ascribe to Killy contempt, awe, hatred, confusion, understanding and appreciation, is both to blame, in the sense that it is the context which makes this ski champion into a sales-pitch robot, and blameless, in that it too is perhaps, here, presented as in a sense ‘natural’.

It is important, however, to consider the difference between the conventions of the puff-piece interview – the ‘fan-magazine bullshit’ imagined in the above extract – and the kind of contexts, including some exploration of the operation of American capitalism itself, which are evoked in Gonzo. The typical soft-news sports piece profiling someone in Killy’s situation, asking the kind of superficial questions which are implicated in the manufacturing of Killy-the-zombie, has clearly defined conventions, which can be seen as in a sense being deliberately subverted by Gonzo in *The Temptations Of Jean-Claude Killy*:

Star athletes may be placed in wider cultural terms, as reflecting the age in which they perform, but rarely are they situated in the political matrix of sport and, if at all, only in the context of representing the nation and thus causing it to resonate with some wider ‘feel good factor’ (as in the pride engendered in the triumphs of Tim Henman or Greg Rusedski in tennis). Star profiles may also be an occasion where cross-promotion of sponsors and advertisers can piggy-back on the focus on their star man or woman. (Boyle & Haynes, 2000: 175)

Though Thompson’s narrative voice contains elements of sympathy for Killy, the cross-promotion of his sponsors is critiqued rather than facilitated by Thompson, and Killy is deployed in examining ‘wider cultural terms’ which link the political matrix of sport to political sites of struggle. This is, incidentally, part of the reasons why the piece was

published in the progressive *Scanlan's Monthly* after being rejected by *Playboy Magazine*, which had commissioned Thompson to write exactly the kind of promotional profile piece which he critiques, rather than provides (Weingarten, 2005: 225-229).

This includes links to issues surrounding race, and even to criticism of aspects of the system of American capitalism itself. The system which is seen as producing Killy's 'temptations' may be as inevitable in itself, implicitly, as was Killy's fate after the Olympics. Given, however, the skier's (albeit apparently ambivalent) consent, and even appreciation for his own affluent circumstances, there is room to consider what other thematics may be at work in the piece's ultimate framing of Killy as a victim – without forgetting that a victim, even of the type 'fallen hero', is a very different creature from the 'hero' that would be Killy's usual role in such a feature.

Noting the comforts of Killy's lifestyle, from commanding extremely high salaries for his endorsements to preferential treatment on airplanes and even the apparent perks of his sex-symbol status, Thompson doesn't make any kind of overt claim that the trappings of Killy's success are undesirable, unimportant, intrinsically unsatisfying, or, indeed, any of the other familiar ways of explicitly criticising consumerist discourses surrounding riches and/or fame. There is, however, room to consider whether it is perhaps simply the notion that being a commodified celebrity is beneath the dignity of a World Champion athlete, that prompts Thompson's conclusion regarding Killy, that:

He is a bright young Frenchman with a completely original act ... and a pragmatic frame of reference that is better grounded, I suspect, than my own. He is doing pretty well for himself, and nothing in his narrow, high-powered experience can allow him to understand how I can watch his act and say that it looks, to me, like a very hard dollar – maybe the hardest. (Thompson, 1980: 104)

Professional retired-sports-star may arguably be a demeaningly mundane arena in which to make a living, but that wouldn't seem enough to warrant Thompson's use of the

superlative, were it not for his emphasis on the contrast between Killy's former and current careers, in terms of what it might be possible (though only later, after Thompson had coined the term) to call edgework.

There is perhaps a subcultural appropriateness about the way in which Thompson comes to frame his sympathy for Killy in terms of a comparison with an anonymous member of the counter-culture. Thompson recalls being struck, during a visit to a New Hampshire ski resort where Killy was appearing, by the facial expression of the lead-singer and drummer of a local jazz-rock band, as they covered 'Proud Mary' by *Creedence Clearwater Revival*:

He was getting right into it, and somewhere around the third chorus I recognized the weird smile of a man who had found his own rhythm, that rumoured echo of a high white sound that most men never hear. I sat there in the dark smoke of that place and watched him climb ... far up on some private mountain to that point where you look in the mirror and see a bright bold streaker, blowing all the fuses and eating them like popcorn on the way up. (Thompson, 1980: 103)

Thompson's respect for those who manage to live on the edge, to work the limits of human possibility, is presented as grounded in empathy not for the 'glory' or 'heroism' of their accomplishments per se, but rather simply in an understanding of what those experiences feel like, and may be seen to represent. (See the previous chapter for a fuller discussion of the theorisation of 'edgework' within the Gonzo Text.)

This sympathy for edgeworkers may be seen, at least in part, as the source of his sympathy for Killy, despite the former skier's certain greed and alleged debasement. Thompson immediately relates the sympathetic figure of 'this nondescript little bugger' (Thompson, 1980: 102), lost in making music, to Killy, rendering his experience, as represented in the piece, in some senses both less remote and more human:

That image had to remind me of Killy, streaking down the hills at Grenoble for the first, second and third of those incredible three gold medals. Jean-Claude has *been there* – to that rare high place where only the snow leopards live; and now,

twenty-six-years-old with more dollars than he can use or count, there is nothing else to match those peaks he has already beaten. Now it is all downhill for the world's richest ski bum. (Thompson, 1980: 103)

It is in this context that Thompson expresses sympathy, even pity, for the immensely rich and successful skier. This evocation of the subjective experience of freedom and exhilaration, attempting to represent some sense of the kind of edgework Thompson perceives in the man's triumphs, is perhaps a key aspect of the profile of Killy.

This point may be seen as facilitating the piece's attempt to communicate something of the sadness of seeing a wild animal caged, well-treated but tragically out of its element, regarding Thompson-the-narrator's impressions of Jean-Claude Killy the Chevrolet salesman, once an edgeworker:

But now, with nothing else to win, he is down on the killing floor with the rest of us – sucked into strange and senseless wars on unfamiliar terms; haunted by a sense of loss that no amount of money can ever replace; mocked by the cotton-candy rules of a mean game that still awes him ... locked into a gilded life-style where winning means keeping his mouth shut and reciting, on cue, from other men's scripts. (Thompson, 1980: 103)

This represented sadness is, perhaps, one way of manifesting the perceptible tension between the ideal of a society which makes room for lifestyles commensurate with the human capacities for meaningful experience, and the kind of alternatives that are all that remain after human possibilities have been corrupted, exploited, and limited by the darker aspects of human nature.

This theme of the limits of human potential, related to the worshipful ideas like 'greatness' and 'heroism' which are so tangled up in the mythic landscape of sport, is familiar, in a sense, within conventional sports journalism. Gonzo sports journalism, however, does not endorse the conventional myth-structures which use these ideas of 'glory', and the like, to elevate 'sport' above 'life':

In other ways, sport is an improvement [on 'real' life]. The heroes we, as sports journalists hail are losers as often as winners, extraordinary mostly in their ordinariness, their accessibility. The villains are easily identified yet capable of swift redemption ... Best of all – because its physicality can narrow the gap between rich and poor, and because its mental demands narrow the gap between strong and weak – David regularly beats Goliath. No other journalistic discipline, I would contend, is so concerned with celebrating life's possibilities. (Steen, 2008: 17)

It is both the emotional power and the intellectual incongruousness of the contrast between this celebratory aspect of discourses around sport, and the image of a 'great' athlete like Killy, on the clock at a mixer or a car show, that informs and energises the Gonzo profile of this 'ski-bum'. Like the symbolic deployments of Las Vegas, or Richard Nixon, that later came to be incorporated into the Gonzo Text, the marketing of Jean-Claude Killy represents the base uses to which America and the American system puts even its most precious materials – its capitalist ideology, its democratic institutions, and even its heroes.

This might be viewed, in terms of previously discussed ideas of what I have been calling 'receptivity' (see especially Chapter One), as a kind of reverse of the mainstream deployment of the process. Here, perhaps, Thompson is finding that a marketing system which should only accept the debased and intrinsically mercantile, is receptive to a man who is 'great', as a champion edgeworker. This point, however, is parenthetical here, and in any case but a small part of a wider theme, exploring corruption in relation to and found within the realms of sport. The most 'Gonzo' aspect of this piece, from a certain set of perspectives, is probably the methodology of constructing this implied critique of the darker aspects of the American cultural landscape. Beyond the debasement of Killy's discipline, and beyond skiing and car sales and the other logical, in a sense literal contexts in which the piece digs out the mundane monetary realities, there are links outward to features of contemporary American life –

specifically and most prominently relating to race and to political violence – with minimal direct relevance to the case of Jean-Claude Killy.

The methodology used in weaving these digressions into the fabric of the Text may perhaps be considered as Gonzo in style, employing, for example, a visceral, vitriolic subjectivity when Thompson-the-character realises that the Chicago auto show is taking place at the Stockyards Amphitheatre. This is ‘that rotten slaughterhouse where Mayor Daley had buried the Democratic Party’ (Thompson, 1980: 93), and Thompson prefaces the scene of Killy's appearance at the auto-show with a personal, emotional, subjective aside:

I had been there before, and I remembered it well. Chicago – this vicious, stinking zoo, this mean-grinning, Mace-smelling boneyard of a city; an elegant rockpile monument to everything cruel and stupid and corrupt in the human spirit. (Thompson, 1980: 93)

This is the kind of context, relating to the cultural and political realities of American society, to which Killy is not privy and with which he is not concerned – but perhaps that could be part of the point.

Killy, the central figure of the piece, may be afforded the luxury of an outlook of pure commercialism, and a circumscribed field of interests that excludes, for example, any inclination toward witnessing the athletic excellence of his fellow Chevrolet spokesman, O.J. Simpson. Thompson, however, in asides, side-notes and incidental anecdotes, reminds the reader of wider contexts of social injustice, even as he notes Killy's complete lack of interest in such matters. Thompson tried to interest Killy in seeing a film of O.J. Simpson ‘running with a football’ (Thompson, 1980: 96) but:

That was before I understood the boundaries of Killy's curiosity. Like Calvin Coolidge, he seems to feel that 'the business of America is business'. He comes here to make money, and aesthetics be damned. He wasn't interested in anything about O.J. Simpson except the size of his Chevrolet contract – and only vaguely in that. (Thompson, 1980: 96)

Killy, as a Frenchman and thus a foreigner, is perhaps implicitly not to be expected to perceive some of the unpleasant cultural implications of his employment. In a way, this ignorance allows Thompson to draw attention to cultural prejudices that Killy misses, and which Americans perhaps to some extent unconsciously naturalise.

Thompson observes that while Killy performs at the auto-show, signing autographs and having his scripted conversation about his Camaro with a blonde spokesmodel:

Not far away, on another platform, O.J. Simpson fielded questions from a ripe little black girl, also dressed in tight ski pants. The acts remained segregated except in moments of unexpected crowd pressure, when the black model would occasionally have to interview Killy. The blonde girl was never cast with O.J. – at least not while I was there. Which hardly matters, except as casual evidence that Chevy's image-makers still see racial separatism as good business, particularly in Chicago. (Thompson, 1980:94)

The subject of the piece may be Jean-Claude Killy, to whom these contexts are not directly relevant, but intertwined and mutually-entangled with this layer of meaning, the Text also reminds the reader that these commercial and cultural activities are related, complexly, through capitalism and the car industry and Chicago, to riot police busting protestors' heads, and to the racist status quo. There is Gonzo in this methodology, interweaving disparate textual features, illustrating a complex and critical vision of the cultural landscape surrounding the bright, shining, expensive myths of American ideological propaganda, including those of big time sport.

Pictures of the Riot

In *The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent & Depraved*, the piece which history records as the birth of Gonzo journalism, Thompson's approach to his nominal topic within the work can be seen as building on some of the same structural elements that were in play in the Killy piece. There is, however, also a need to take into account issues relating to the

‘new’ features which prompt this piece's designation as the site of a methodological breakthrough. The fact that this is considered as the first piece of Gonzo journalism obviously does not make it some kind of privileged specimen against which to judge other examples of Gonzo, or through which to formulate an understanding of the concept, at the expense of other textual elements. The special status that is accorded to *The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent And Depraved* as being the site of the birth of Gonzo may, however, be considered as a feature of the Text, as read within the cultural space of Gonzo. This is another thread of meaning in the fabric of the Text, that this work is where Gonzo is born, in a feature article about the Kentucky Derby.

This piece is sports journalism in the sense that Thompson is a sportswriter and the Kentucky Derby, a horserace, is a sporting event. The inevitably loosely defined and unevenly applied status of sports journalism is complicated in this case, perhaps, by the fact that the horses, and the races themselves, are all but ignored in the article. In the entire piece, the following fragment is more or less the total content dealing directly with horseracing, in terms of specific horses, races and results:

The race itself was only two minutes long, and even from our super-status seats and using 12-power glasses, there was no way to see what was really happening. Later, watching a TV rerun in the press box, we saw what happened to our horses. Holy Land, Ralph's choice, stumbled and lost his jockey in the final turn. Mine, Silent Screen, had the lead coming into the stretch, but faded to fifth at the finish. The winner was a 16-1 shot named Dust Commander. (Thompson, 1980: 41)

This is, in a sense, all the coverage the Derby gets, as a horserace. This is particularly striking as a departure not just from the conventions of sports journalism, but even more so in terms of the conventions of the horse-racing ‘beat’ for a sports reporter.

Horse-racing is not Thompson’s regular ‘beat’, obviously, and this is a feature on a single sporting event, rather than an example of a daily or weekly column on horse-

racing, but there is still a strong juxtaposition between the reality of this Gonzo reporting, and the world of horses as it is usually constructed. This is particularly true in the context of conventional sports journalism, which would be expected to produce a completely different approach:

The drive for exclusivity and a 'good nose' for a story are the pressing demands of contemporary sports journalism. Here the 'beat' system comes into its own and each reporter can expect to have developed their own network of contacts within any given sport. In horse-racing a major part of a journalist's work is geared towards being a tipster. This may require contacts with owners, trainers, stable hands and jockeys so that a journalist can gain an insight into how a particular horse is performing. In order to get a feel for individual races it could also help a journalist to get information on the ground or the 'running' from insiders at the course as well as up-to-date information on the latest odds from the bookmakers. (Boyle & Haynes, 2000: 168)

There is more to the difference between the Gonzo approach to the Kentucky Derby and that of conventional sports journalism than the difference between a feature, focussing on social context, and a conventional race 'report'. The race is, broadly speaking, very much the subject matter of the article, but it is the social dimensions of the *event* of the race that are the piece's main focus. They are in a sense the cultural Text which Thompson uses Gonzo methods to examine. In some ways this would simply resemble the alternative focus expected of a feature, but, in the interaction between this event and the Gonzo methodology within this Text, there is more complexity to the web of meanings in play.

The nature of horse-racing is peculiar, as a sport in which the human athlete – the jockey – is considered secondarily to the horse, whose owner is seen to make the lion's share of the profits. It is also a sport whose culture heavily emphasises the potential for enthusiasts to gamble, much more than it emphasises other typical sporting discourses of fan 'loyalty' and other non-mercenary emotions, including the supposed pleasure of spectating itself. The winners and losers that are most interesting in the context of this piece's examination of the Derby are not the equine competitors, or their human riders,

or, as might be the case in the aftermath of other sporting results, the clichéd legions of loyal fans, celebrating or commiserating, as appropriate.

The spectators in this case are not concerned with marking the result with revelry; the result is in fact the end of the revelry:

Moments after the race was over, the crowd surged wildly for the exits, rushing for cabs and buses. The next day's *Courier* told of violence in the parking lot; people were punched and trampled, pockets were picked, children lost, bottles hurled. (Thompson, 1980: 41)

It is only in raw capitalist terms that a 'winner' is selected in this mass. The Kentucky Derby, as Thompson evokes it here, is about money, rather than glory or loyalty or emotion:

We hung around the press box long enough to watch a mass interview with the winning owner, 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'. The sportswriters murmured their admiration and a waiter filled Lehmann's glass with Chivas Regal. He had just won \$127,000 with a horse that cost him \$6,500 two years ago. His occupation, he said, was 'retired contractor'. And then he added, with a big grin, 'I just retired'. (Thompson, 1980: 41)

The horse and the race appear incidental, and even the result is reduced to its profit and loss. Beyond the scale of the gambling and the scale of the social gathering creating a carnival of drunkenness and largely undirected excitement in the huge, chaotic crowds, the race itself is, in a sense, displayed as empty spectacle. This deployment, far from emptying the piece itself of meaning, can perhaps be considered as a key feature of how the Gonzo nature of *The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent And Depraved* is constructed.

As with the depiction of the search for the American Dream in the narrative of *Fear and Loathing In Las Vegas*, here again, Thompson, accompanied this time by the British illustrator, Ralph Steadman, is on a quest of sorts, for the perfect face for Steadman to sketch, to depict a certain aspect of the society in which the Kentucky Derby takes place:

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 the 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 whisky 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. (Thompson, 1980: 35-6)

Thompson relates the object of this quixotic endeavour explicitly to the desire to illustrate all the rotten elements of the Kentucky Derby's cultural context, particularly in terms of the deficiencies of the society in which it takes place.

The breeding of 'thoroughbred' humans is introduced as a topic, and explained in the deliberately morally neutral terms of the genetic predispositions of horses, but Thompson immediately links this inbreeding, and this symbolic face of the whisky gentry, to the racist ideologies which are so dominant, 'natural', 'traditional' in this cultural environment:

But the breeding of humans is not so wisely supervised [as that of horses], 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. (Goddamn, did you hear about Smitty's daughter? She went crazy in Boston last week and married a nigger!) (Thompson, 1980: 36)

The face that they seek is more than a specimen of a stereotype. It is a face whose faults will stand in for the faults of an entire society, as constructed in this Gonzo vision of Louisville, Kentucky, around Derby time.

There is something of the fable or the fairy-tale about the structure of this thread of the narrative of the piece. The text emphasises the importance of this mythic deployment of the sign of this whisky gentry face, in order to illustrate the wider social and cultural context of the horse-racing: '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, 1980: 36). This is the object of the

quest, and Thompson and Steadman, the knights who seek it, are inexorably immersed more and more in this corrupt, degraded society, drinking like the rest, sweating like the rest and exhausting themselves like the rest.

There is a kind of satisfyingly familiar storybook justice to the denouement, the revelation of exactly where, of course, Thompson eventually finds the elusive, eroded face of dissipated Southern gentility:

My eyes had finally opened enough for me to focus on the mirror across the room and I was stunned at the shock of the recognition. For a confused instant I thought that Ralph had brought somebody with him – a model for that one special face we'd been looking for. 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, 1980: 42)

This is, however, more complicated than some moral fable about becoming the monster in the process of hunting it. Thompson's face is, in a sense, the face of the victim/product of the grotesque nature of the social environment. This perceptible drink-ravagement and disease are, it is important to note, signs of damage before they are signs of culpability.

The Derby is presented, first and foremost, as a gathering of people who are going to behave badly in every possible way, and again and again the text represents these people as sadly lacking in healthy vitality, self-control, morality, intellect, integrity and basically all the qualities that, allegedly, elevate homo sapiens above the beasts. Thompson looks back with open condemnation on the first race-goer he encountered at the airport:

And he had, after all, come here once again to make a nineteenth-century ass of himself in the midst of some jaded, atavistic freakout with nothing to recommend it except a very saleable 'tradition' ... 'The little lady won't come any more', he said. 'She just grits her teeth and turns me loose for this one. And when I say 'loose' I do mean *loose*! I toss ten-dollar bills around like they were

goin' outa style! Horses, whisky, women ... shit, there's women in this town that'll do *anything* for money. (Thompson, 1980: 31)

This is not, however, some kind of isolated display of exaggerated hedonism. The Kentucky Derby does not introduce anything new to this 'doomed' society – it just manifests and exacerbates all its many failings and excesses, which are themselves linked, within the text, outward, from sport and Kentucky, to the wider contexts of American culture.

Even Jimbo, turned loose by his wife, is just a part of a landscape of corruption and commodification. Thompson convinces the man that he is a photographer for *Playboy Magazine*, using a fake ID purchased from a Colorado pimp, who, we are given to understand, used it for more directly exploitative deceptions (Thompson, 1980: 31). Jimbo's penchant for employing the most expensive, presumably esoteric services of prostitutes, while vacationing from his marriage, is likewise placed in a wider context of an avaricious society and a self-serving political culture:

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, 1980: 31)

Continually throughout the text of *The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent And Depraved*, links like this are made, and emphasised, weaving a tapestry of inter-related meanings regarding the perceptibly disgusting aspects of the Derby, the socio-cultural landscape of the locale where the race takes place, and the wider cultural, economic and political contexts of conservative, Nixon-era America.

Thompson can be seen to embed this sporting phenomenon, perhaps more emphatically in this piece than in the Killy profile, into various contexts relating to vulgar, exploitative, vicious and otherwise negative aspects of American life. The structure of

The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent And Depraved can be seen to employ a much more complex, almost chaotic array of linear and non-linear thematic, stylistic and narrative links. It is perhaps easy, in this multi-faceted text, to miss the possible significance of a thinly veiled reference to Kent State University. Though the Kent State massacre is evoked in the piece only briefly and by inference, it may have figured more prominently in the contemporary constructions of the Text than is obvious to later readings, which may miss some of the implicit cultural resonance. The shooting of students by National Guardsmen on the campus of Kent State University, which took place two days after the Derby, was a news story of considerable national prominence when this issue of *Scanlan's Monthly* went to press¹⁵.

Within a framing device of a kind of 'state-of-the-nation' context of mentioning stories then prominent in the news, Thompson's references are still limited by the circumstance that he is describing events, and thoughts, from before the massacre. Thompson's narrative voice still hints, however, at the elephant in the room, with a kind of tensely ominous, matter-of-fact, ostensibly parenthetical reminder of the violence that was to come:

At the airport newsstand I picked up a *Courier-Journal* and scanned the front page headlines: 'Nixon sends GIs into Cambodia to Hit Reds' ... 'B-52s Raid, then 2,000 GIs Advance 20 miles' ... '4,000 US troops Deployed Near Yale as Tension Grows Over Panther Protest'. At the bottom of the page was a photo of Diane Crump, soon to become the first woman jockey ever to ride in the Kentucky Derby. The photographer had snapped her 'stopping in the barn area to fondle her mount, Fathom'. The rest of the paper was spotted with ugly war news and stories of 'student unrest'. There was no mention of any trouble brewing at a University in Ohio called Kent State. (Thompson, 1980: 30)

This reference, near the beginning of the piece, could perhaps be seen as casting a long shadow in the article, though there is little clear reference back to it other than a

¹⁵ See for example John Kifner's front-page coverage of the shootings for *The New York Times*, accompanied by John Filo's Pulitzer-prize winning, iconic photograph of the aftermath (Kifner, 1970).

similarly matter-of-fact, ostensibly parenthetical mention in the final paragraph: ‘A radio news bulletin says the National Guard is massacring students at Kent State and Nixon is still bombing Cambodia’ (Thompson, 1980: 43). The evocation of the tragedy of the Kent State shootings provides an extreme, sad note in the overall context of war, in Vietnam, in Cambodia and, indeed, on and around the Yale campus. The Kentucky Derby doesn't just not take place in a vacuum – it takes place in a society which can be seen from some perspectives as being in crisis, heavily divided, anxious, and riven with internal tensions and social unrest.

It is within this context of perceptible social and political tension and conflict throughout American society that Thompson chooses first to situate his account of the Derby within the piece. This process is a complex, multi-stranded feature of the Text's operation. I should make it clear here that I am not attempting to imply that there is something revolutionary, or even peculiar to Gonzo, in placing a sporting event in the context of social and political divisions. There are perhaps inevitable and certainly ubiquitous links between sport and conflict, often noted by journalists, as well as students of sport and society:

It is a truism that all societies are divided. There are divisions between racial and ethnic groupings, between the rich and the poor, the young and old, between men and women, adults and children, the healthy and the sick and so on. All of these, and numerous other divisions besides, impact upon the world of sport. They are reflected in the ways in which sports are played, watched and organised. Sport may also reinforce and, in some instances, exacerbate the divisions. (Bairner and Sugden, 2000: 2)

It is more the manner than the fact of placing the Kentucky Derby in the context of a divided society, indeed a society mired in a politically divisive war, which is most useful here. Implicit thematic links between the chaos at the track and the chaos in Vietnam or at Kent State help to illuminate Gonzo's nature and operation.

Before the ominous evocation of Kent State, the previously discussed Gonzo method of socially relevant but highly implausible wild fantasy is used within the Text, to create an initial frame of public paranoia about social unrest. In this case the vivid fantasy is not represented directly in Thompson's narrative voice, but through the framing device of Thompson-the-character playing a prank on 'Jimbo'. Thompson-the character toys with the emotional well-being of the chauvinistic drunk who is the first person he encounters within the piece, by convincing the man that his beloved Kentucky Derby is under threat: "'There's going to be trouble", I said. "My assignment is to take pictures of the riot"' (Thompson, 1980: 29).

The nature of the story Thompson spins is fairly straightforward, that the police and National Guard have 20,000 troops on stand-by for an expected Derby-day riot, with shooting, led by the Black Panthers but not limited to them:

'It's not just the Panthers. The FBI says busloads of white crazies are coming in from all over the country – to mix with the crowd and attack all at once, from every direction. They'll be dressed like everybody else. You know – coats and ties and all that. But when the trouble starts ... well, that's why the cops are so worried.' (Thompson, 1980: 30)

Again, I might note in passing an implication of 'receptivity', embodied here in the evocation of the intrinsically ridiculous futility of trying physically to exclude dissent from a crowd, since, like drugs in a receptor, dissenters will pass as unnoticed in the throng as the conformist drunks, but this is not the approach to this incident that is at issue here. In addition to laying the groundwork for the later exploration of themes of civil unrest, racial tension and grotesque violence, it is possible to consider this unlikely story of the expected riot not just in terms of the themes which Thompson's narrative evokes, but also in terms of the textual significance of his story's reception by its first 'reader', the degenerate Derby fan, Jimbo.

This passage bears striking similarities to a section of the later Gonzo work, *Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas* (which is also, to note in passing, readable as a text performing a kind of deliberate break with the traditions of sports journalism). In this, Thompson's alter ego Raoul Duke, and the Samoan attorney, this time with the help of misleading IDs which suggest jobs in law enforcement, again convince a paranoid American of the threat posed by violently deranged dissidents. In the Las Vegas version of the put-on, the threat is from 'dope fiends' who are apparently particularly fond of home invasions:

'They work in pairs', said my attorney. 'Sometimes in gangs. They'll climb right into your bedroom and sit on your chest, with big Bowie knives'. He nodded solemnly. 'They might even sit on your *wife's chest* – put the blade right down on her throat'. (Thompson, 2005a: 145)

Thompson-the-character and his companion doubtless gain some credibility from their identification as attendees of the National District Attorneys Association conference on the drug problem, but the story might still seem at least somewhat incredible (particularly coming from two strangers in a bar, whatever their identification).

Indeed, Thompson and the attorney push the story further, from the initial image of drug-induced violent criminality to a graphic, fantastic story of heavily armed, drug-crazed veterans, gone wild for witchcraft and human sacrifice, beheading a victim in order to drink her blood and consume her pineal gland:

'Hell, in Malibu alone, these goddamn Satan-worshippers kill six or eight people *every day*'. He paused to sip his drink. 'And all they want is the blood', he continued. 'They'll take people right off the street if they have to'. He nodded. 'Hell, yes. Just the other day we had a case where they grabbed a girl right out of a McDonald's hamburger stand. She was a waitress. About sixteen years old ... with a lot of people watching too!' ... 'Jesus Christ man. They chopped her goddamn head off right there in the parking lot! Then they cut all kinds of holes in her and sucked out the blood!' (Thompson, 2005a: 146)

Thomson-the-character and his Samoan Attorney associate, casting themselves in the role of California law enforcement personnel, convince the man, and the bartender, that they are unofficially sanctioned to respond to this threat with wholesale decapitations of

the enemy, and leave the man debating whether or not to tell his wife, but admonished to keep what he's heard a secret. In Kentucky, Jimbo was also left deceived and unsettled, wished good luck for the impending riot by his new acquaintance the *Playboy* photographer. The two passages have many superficial similarities, however trying to discern possible threads of common meaning within these ostensibly similar tales can be viewed as a matter of considerable complexity.

There are reasons for this digression back into *Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas*, beyond the utility of noting that this habit of Thompson-the-character's, of scaring conformist Americans through exploiting their own bizarre terrors of deviants, is a significant, repeated feature of Gonzo. The more interesting aspect of these features of the Text may well be that in both cases, the audiences respond similarly, with credulity. From a certain perspective, neither story seems plausible enough to be effective as a put-on, and yet both pranks work on their immediate victims. These stories, in the Las Vegas hotel bar as in the Louisville airport bar, are believed – with shock, with horror, even with difficulty – but they are nonetheless believed. The manner and nature of this belief is interesting, inasmuch as perhaps a key feature of these tales, within the Gonzo Text, is the simple idea that Thompson is able to convince (somewhat) random strangers that some of their fellow Americans pose such bizarre and terrifying dangers.

In both cases, the victims of the Gonzo tall tales display some shocked scepticism at the stories' horrible details. In Las Vegas the victim, a cop from Georgia, protests that the idea of drug-fiends being involved in witchcraft and human sacrifice is 'science fiction stuff' (Thompson, 2005a: 146) and expresses disbelief that the ringleader of the murder and blood-drinking of a young McDonald's waitress could be a former Marine Corps major – 'Not a major!' (Thompson, 2005a: 147) – but he is nonetheless basically

willing to accept the idea that these things are happening, even though he does not understand how or why. There is anguish and confusion, but fundamentally, he is certainly at least open to the idea that the situation is desperate, even if he is not actually predisposed to believe it: ““Jesus God almighty”, said the southerner. “What the hell’s *goin’ on* in this country?”” (Thompson, 2005a: 145)

The man’s initial horror at the violence and his eventual, deeply unsettled acceptance of the witchcraft connection, in some ways echo Jimbo’s deeply emotional response to the terrible spectre of a possible disruption of Derby Day:

‘No!’ he shouted; his hands flew up and hovered momentarily between us, as if to ward off the words he was hearing. Then he whacked his fist on the bar. ‘Those sons of bitches! God Almighty! The Kentucky Derby!’ He kept shaking his head. ‘No! *Jesus!* That’s almost too bad to believe!’ Now he seemed to be sagging on the stool, and when he looked up his eyes were misty. ‘Why? Why *here?* Don’t they respect *anything?*’ (Thompson, 1980: 30)

He too is shocked and appalled, and though he ultimately accepts the truth of Thompson-the-character’s story, he also shares confusion with the Georgia policeman as to what all these incomprehensible developments mean for America. The wording of his anguished query is eerily similar to the other man’s:

He sat for a moment, looking hurt and confused and not quite able to digest all this terrible news. Then he cried out: ‘Oh ... Jesus! What in the name of God is happening in this country? Where can you get *away* from it?’ (Thompson, 1980: 30)

These men are so confused and frightened by what is happening, or seems to be, in an America they find it increasingly difficult to recognise or understand, that they are ready to believe almost anything of the deviants whose motivations and lifestyles are so alien and wrong (or, at least, not right) that they might conceivably be capable of the most unthinkable outrages, whether against random members of the public, or against the sacred celebration of the Kentucky Derby.

The Derby, of course, as a sporting event which is considered as a kind of national institution, at least by some, represents an eminently suitable cultural site for tensions between ideas of the traditional and of the new to manifest:

Thus images and imaginings of a country's past, present and projections of its future, come together to underpin the mediation of sporting discourses. Put simply, at certain specific political, economic and cultural moments these can come together around one sport or sporting event and be evident across both sports and media institutions ... At other times they may be more diverse and even contradictory, but are always rooted in the tensions between change and continuity which characterize societies. (Boyle & Haynes, 2000: 154)

The threat to the Derby is, however, frighteningly incomprehensible for Jimbo and his ilk, since some of the respect felt for the Derby, as unquestionably sacrosanct institution, should, to his understanding, be automatic and universal. This ideological stance, clearly, could never comprehend the idea that from a perspective of revolutionary and/or progressive politics, the Derby's anachronistic decadence would or could make the event in any sense a legitimate target for confrontational activism. Such ideas are, it would seem, literally incomprehensible. The fact that the complexities of the American cultural landscape are perceived by some as sufficiently mysterious and threatening that some citizens seem ready to be afraid of sudden attacks by a unified army of deviants comprised of Black Panthers, dope fiends, hippies and Satanists, is used to illustrate and emphasise the fear and confusion felt by much of America at this time.

How to make sense of apparent chaos, to try to understand and represent symbolically significant cultural phenomena – like violent California drug-fiends, or the Kentucky Derby festivities of the faux-genteel whisky gentry – is at issue. The cultural contexts of sports phenomena, within the specific field of sports journalism, are multi-faceted, dynamic and complex, and deeply entangled in webs of American language, culture and myth. Contextualising these signs can be seen to require an unconventional, almost

holistic approach, in order to work towards explaining sports culture in terms of the wider American socio-political context. This may perhaps be considered as a type of approach to cultural criticism, based on an explicitly interwoven multiplicity of contexts, for which Gonzo is uniquely suited.

There is also a stylistic aspect to Gonzo's presentation, and attempted penetration, of what you might call 'the fog of sport' (though perhaps retaining the tapestry metaphor is more theoretically apt). The abandonment of the formal conventions, and boundaries, of 'the world of sport' as defined in the dominant discourses of sports journalism, is mirrored in the self-declared abandonment of conventional methods, and even conventional prose, in terms of the *writing* of the piece itself. This breakdown in professional journalistic practice is, tellingly, prompted by a breakdown of the unprofessionally contaminated body of the professional in question, due to alcohol and exhaustion:

From that point on – almost from the 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, 1980: 38)

Thompson-the-character formally signals that a section of this piece has, in a significant sense, not been 'written', as journalism, since it is not finished work (whatever that may be), but rather notes, without even the claimed authority of an unimpaired authorial memory, presented as unedited and unremembered.

The peculiar status of this section is emphasised perhaps even to the point of evoking some sense that these notes are not 'created' at all, but are rather an almost accidental souvenir, the natural consequence of Thompson's (new) Gonzo process:

But now, looking at the big red notebook I carried all through the scene, I see more or less what happened. The book itself is somewhat mangled and bent; some of the pages are torn, others are shrivelled and stained by what appears to

be whisky, but taken as a whole, with sporadic memory flashes, the notes seem to tell the story. To wit: (Thompson, 1980: 38)

And what happened next, the methodological break which was considered the birth of what came to be called Gonzo journalism, is, as I have previously, briefly discussed, the stuff of legend, in the cultural histories of American journalism and literature. The obvious question which this prompts is, what is so special about this next section? It seems extremely unlikely that all that would have been necessary is the innovation of publishing pages torn straight out of his or her notebook, and any reporter could have ‘discovered’ Gonzo journalism.

In attempting to theorise the functioning of this literary/journalistic device, it is necessary to work on identifying the significant threads of meaning entangled in this aspect of the Gonzo Text. The opening section of this ‘Gonzo’ account of Derby Day does not seem to be especially revolutionary journalistic prose. The most prominent feature of this section of notes is probably initially the unpolished brevity of the prose, making the text read like the rough notes Thompson-the-character declares them to be: ‘Rain all nite [sic] until dawn. No sleep. Christ, here we go, a nightmare of mud and madness ... But no. By noon the sun burns through – perfect day, not even humid’ (Thompson, 1980: 38). The sections of verbatim note transcription move from thought to thought and image to image, recording minimal details of each. The notes perhaps invite a reading which is aware that each one represents, on one level, just a reminder of the bones of an idea, to be fully articulated and edited and incorporated into the flow of the piece, in a re-writing and editing process that was never completed. Thompson-the-character effectively asks that this artefact of the Gonzo experience of the Derby be considered, in some ways, as a snapshot of writing-in-progress, rather than ‘journalism’ itself. This section of notes may be read as a first draft of a narrative not unlike what has

gone before in the article, but *unfinished*, by Thompson's implied standards for his own work.

The way the prose can be read, as the early notes for writing that is not offered in the piece, simultaneously foregrounds the phantom of the author-as-author, and at the same time emphasises the possibility that Thompson's control over the creative process, and the final creation, has collapsed:

Out to the track in a cab, avoid that terrible parking in people's front yards, \$25 each, toothless old men on the street with big signs: PARK HERE, flagging cars in the yard. 'That's fine, boy, never mind the tulips'. Wild hair on his head, straight up like a clump of reeds. (Thompson, 1980: 38)

The 'notebook' form suits the function within the Text, creating a resonance between style and content in that an ostensibly immediate, unedited prose style is employed to illustrate an impulsive, uninhibited social event. These parallels, between the barrage of subjective stimulation that is the substance of the account of the day, and the style of the 'Gonzo' section, extends beyond the way these unfinished notes can be seen as reflecting the journalist's own drunken failure, amidst the sea of drunken failure which is described as the essence of Derby Day at the track.

The shift from images and events, like flashes of the weather or the parking situation, to thoughts and opinions, including fantastic, but thematically relevant pseudo-fictions, (some of which are not totally unlike the yarn previously spun for Jimbo, in terms of grotesquerie and horror) highlights the radical subjectivity which is at the heart of Gonzo:

Steadman is now worried about fire. Somebody told him about the clubhouse catching on fire two years ago. Could it happen again? Horrible. Trapped in the press box. Holocaust. A hundred thousand people fighting to get out. Drunks screaming in the flames and the mud, crazed horses running wild. Blind in the smoke. Grandstand collapsing into the flames with us on the roof. Poor Ralph is about to crack. Drinking heavily, into the Haig & Haig. (Thompson, 1980: 38)

This is after all, to conventional sensibilities, a somewhat unusual passage to find in a feature on the Kentucky Derby, even if that feature's emphasis is slanted toward social context and commentary, for a progressive publication like *Scanlan's Monthly*. Sports journalism, as a set of professional practices, would not ordinarily countenance such a macabre and potentially terrifying fantasy.

Thompson (as I noted in my Introduction) later gave public accounts of 'the birth of Gonzo' that emphasised once again the accidental, and thus implicitly (in a sense) 'natural' way in which it came about as a reactive response to difficult circumstances:

I was convinced I was finished, I'd blown my mind, couldn't work. So finally I just started jerking pages out of my notebook and numbering them and sending them to the printer. I was sure it was the last article I was ever going to do for anybody. Then when it came out, there were massive numbers of letters, phone calls, congratulations, people calling it a 'great breakthrough in journalism' (Vetter, 1974: 88)

As an approach requiring recourse to ideas of objective truth, the extent to which the contents of this Gonzo Text may be considered as 'in fact' having been deliberately written as they are, rather than accidentally produced in the manner claimed, is obviously not at issue in this query. The style, and content is, however, inextricably entangled with this claimed status of 'accidental' notes.

Since the prose is not finished and does not claim to be a document of professional journalism, in that sense, even the limited standards of literary journalism, already looser than those of conventional sports journalism, can be seen not to apply, or at least not fully. This allows for a kind of hyper-subjective prose which eschews conventions of grammar, narrativity, and even the linguistic representation of rational sense:

The grim reaper comes early in this league ... banshees on the lawn at night, screaming out there beside that little iron nigger in jockey clothes. Maybe he's the one who's screaming. Bad DTs and too many snarls at the bridge club. Going down with the stock market. Oh Jesus, the kid has wrecked the new car, wrapped it around the big stone pillar at the bottom of the driveway. Broken leg?

Twisted eye? Send him off to Yale, they can cure anything up there. (Thompson, 1980: 39)

This is not to say that these notes are gibberish, but I do intend to imply that they might be profitably read as like poetry (in this case meaning, in some sense, a creative use of language in which rules of linguistic structure, style and form, are understood as subordinated to aesthetic concerns, potentially to the point of eradication).

In Gonzo prose such as this, there is an abundance of meaning, even if there is a potential shortage of sense. This stylistic manoeuvre is a central component of constructing the hybrid form of Gonzo journalism, complexly and undecidably situated between fiction and journalism, in style and methodology as well as in content, which has been discussed elsewhere in this examination of Gonzo. Gonzo journalism is an idea which interacts complexly with conventional conceptions of 'journalism', as has been shown, but, as will be discussed at greater length in the next section, in the context of *Fear And Loathing At The Super Bowl*, Gonzo journalism can also profitably be seen as engaging directly and explicitly with ideas of 'sports journalism'. Sports journalism is, itself, both a category of writing whose borders and conventions the Gonzo Text plays with and problematises, and also a cultural object which Gonzo examines and critiques.

This Bedrock Sense of Professionalism

The examination of *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent And Depraved* within discourses of sports journalism was perhaps, as noted, ostensibly problematic. Some theoretical perspectives might consider the piece as not necessarily suitable for examination as situated within the sanctified, if intrinsically subjective, borders of 'sports journalism'. The offences against such rules as might apply in terms of form and focus, are,

however, a matter of degrees, rather than of essential difference, even though some accounts of the job description of a sports journalist, unlike Thompson's definition, call for the abrogation of all advocacy of any kind (Koppett, 1994: 134). Gonzo sports journalism can thus be considered to some extent as operating as and within sports journalism, providing a different perspective on the conventional landscape of the culture of (media) sports. Just as discussed in the previous chapter with reference to Gonzo and political reporting, Gonzo sports-writing can be seen as performing both the limits of the genre, and of the relevant standards of professional practice, by transcending them, in terms of both content and style. At times within the Gonzo Text, Thompson's narrative voice even goes so far as to criticise explicitly the professional practices of the conventional journalist.

One of the key themes of *Fear And Loathing At The Super Bowl*, a feature published in (then) counter-cultural *Rolling Stone Magazine*, is this type of critique of journalistic convention, specific to the idea(s) of sports journalism. The points which comprise this critique most directly are interwoven into the narrative. For example, Thompson presents his subjective illness on the morning of Super Bowl Sunday in a context which he ties to criticism of the ways powerful interests work to manage the media for their own ends:

For eight long and degrading days I had skulked around Houston with all the other professionals, doing our jobs – which was actually to do nothing at all except drink all the free booze we could pour into our bodies, courtesy of the National Football League, and listen to an endless barrage of some of the lamest and silliest swill ever uttered by man or beast ... (Thompson, 1980: 53)

Whether witnessing NFL promotional events, wading through the PR defences of a retired celebrity skier, or watching the feed of a Nixon appearance on the campaign trail, Gonzo is highly critical, politically and in terms of Thompson-the-character's subjectivity, of the grim experience of attending managed media events, and also of the

type of passive, non-investigative journalism that may uncritically reproduce their intended media messages.

The overt mockery of both the figure of ‘the pro’ and of the ideology of professionalism itself is emphasised throughout this lengthy feature on the Super Bowl. Not unlike a Presidential election, the Super Bowl can be read as an event which has complex but highly significant mythic recourse to ideas of professionalism, for the athletes, the journalists, and, in many ways, everybody else with a part to play in putting on a professionally presented, professionally reported spectacle on such a mammoth scale. In an early section of the piece, Thompson-the-character, having become convinced that a giant leech has attached itself to his spine, and concerned about ‘the drastic effect I knew it would have, very soon, on my sense of journalistic responsibility’ (Thompson, 1980: 53-4) claims a sudden empathy for another professional’s experience of a crisis:

I have never felt close to John Mitchell, but on that rotten morning in Houston I came as close as I ever will; because he was, after all, a pro ... and so, alas, was I. Or at least I had a fistful of press badges that said I was. (Thompson, 1980: 54)

John Mitchell, former Attorney General and utterly disgraced Watergate conspirator, was ultimately forced to flee Washington by his ‘professional’ activities, which were criminal, anti-democratic and patently unconscionable, and which were eventually to earn him a prison sentence (Meyer, 1988). He is not someone whose professionalism is deployed as admirable. Thompson criticises the idea of being a ‘professional’ journalist through the clear, if sarcastic, implication that in his case, his press badges are his strongest evidence of ‘this bedrock sense of professionalism’ (Thompson, 1980:54) which is shared, in any case, with the lowest and most contemptible grade of political hustler.

Thompson may be evoking the idea of the essentially repetitive nature of sporting events when he suggests that he can re-use the lead-in he wrote for a piece on Super Bowl VII as the lead-in for a piece on Super Bowl VIII. He asserts, perhaps somewhat sarcastically, that the repeated participation of the Miami Dolphins means that:

The only change necessary was the substitution of ‘Minnesota Vikings’ for ‘Washington Redskins’. Except for that, the lead seemed just as adequate for the game that would begin in about six hours as it was for the one that I missed in Los Angeles in January of 73. (Thompson, 1980: 55)

There is an even stronger evocation, however, of the mediocrity and clichés that plague (or at least are sometimes considered as plaguing) the prose which is produced as sports journalism, in the dully repetitive phrasing of the recyclable lead-in itself:

‘The precision-jackhammer attack of the Miami Dolphins stomped the balls off the Minnesota Vikings today by stomping and hammering with one precise jack-thrust after another up the middle, mixed with pinpoint-precision passes into the flat and numerous hammer-jack stops around both ends ...’ (Thompson, 1980: 55)

This is the calibre of the work which Thompson-the-character’s bedrock professionalism feels (obviously not without some implied irony) the situation calls for – writing like that, re-used. This is a joke with roots in the stereotypically limited vocabulary and writing skills of the sports reporter. There is also a reference, though perhaps a subtler one, to the sense of empty repetition evoked by the reported details of any given football game, without the use of context(s) to endow reporting of the athletic spectacle, and/or its numerical result, with any sense of what might be termed the ‘human drama’ of the contest.

Professionalism and laziness share a common goal of efficiency, and just as sports journalism’s professionalism may, Thompson seems to allege, produce lazy writing, it may also produce generally lazy journalistic practice, in terms of the information-gathering aspect of covering the story. The sports journalists in town to cover the Super Bowl spend all their time in the NFL press lounge (where the alcohol is free), not just

abstaining from going out and hunting down some novel angle on the story, but not even personally attending the PR events they intend to recycle:

After the first day or so, when it became balefully clear that there was no point in anybody except the local reporters going out on the press-bus each day for the carefully staged ‘player interviews’, that Dolphin tackle Manny Fernandez described as ‘like going to the dentist every day to have the same tooth filled’, the out-of-town writers began using the local types as a sort of involuntary ‘pool’ ... which was more like an old British Navy press gang, in fact, because the locals had no choice. (Thompson, 1980: 71)

To try to do the job of being a sports journalist while abjuring the use of these meaningless interviews, rather than by using them second-hand, is not a possibility, even if the interviews contain nothing of value. In sports journalism, these quotes are mandatory:

Indeed, quotes are the ‘meat and potatoes’ of a reporter’s work, the stuff that injects colour and life, emphasis and credibility into a story. Even if what is said is lame, trite, unimaginative, a cliché, reporters *must* get quotes from athletes and coaches. (Lowes, 1999: 65)

The quotes matter. Sticking to the formula matters. Being a professional matters. Saying anything of substance, or worse, anything which doesn’t fit into the ethos of the sport, is to be avoided, in this construction of the work of a sports journalist.

This type of approach to covering the Super Bowl is set in stark contrast with the kind of Gonzo method that produces introspective, subjective contexts for the experience of (producing coverage of) the Super Bowl, such as Thompson-the-character’s own non-rational, thematic, stream-of-consciousness musings on the event:

There is some kind of back-door connection in my head between Super Bowls and the Allman Brothers – a strange kind of theme-sound that haunts these goddamn stories no matter where I’m finally forced into a corner to write them. The Allman sound, and rain. (Thompson, 1980: 70)

This representation of a mental association relating to the Super Bowl, though it is followed by a deadline-prompted ‘quick and nasty regression to ‘professionalism’’ (Thompson, 1980: 71), nonetheless represents a small example of a wider theme. It

illustrates, in brief, the Gonzo practice of focussing sports journalism on the social and the cultural contexts which reach 'outside' of sport, but from a subjective, personal set of perspectives that eschew the conventional guidelines regarding notions of both 'importance' and 'relevance'.

Thompson-the-character, in criticising the use of an involuntary press pool and the wholesale regurgitation of NFL publicity material, as well as in supplying his own stream-of-consciousness alternative to the conventional methods, performs a kind of limited independence from the institutional power of organised football. The subjectivity he employs here can, however, perhaps also be seen as cutting the Text off from some of the mythic structures of football which may interest the reader:

On the one hand, as a journalist you face the challenge of telling the story as you find it and often have to resist the temptation to simply run with the 'media pack'. While on the other, you must recognise that at the cultural and commercial core of the sports industry is the process of myth-making, with sports journalists a central element in that process. (Boyle, 2006: 23)

The sportswriter is expected to be a journalist, but not to show the readers too closely what's behind the curtain, at least according to some. The sports journalist is, after all, in the business of selling the myths of sport, and this is not an end best served by focussing either on the less commercially appealing aspects of those myths, or by focussing on the machinery, the sports media included, through which those myths are manufactured, transmitted and commercially exploited.

Some academic thought concerned with the structures of mediated professional sport sees this kind of conventional approach as maintaining the control, or even censorship, of 'sports journalism'. These aspects are sometimes alleged to have reached the point where 'sports journalism' can and should be considered as a tool of the public relations

machinery of the sports institutions in question, essentially comprehensible more as marketing material than as journalism:

Sports news is ideological precisely because it constitutes a discourse that serves the promotional interests of the major-league sports industry's primary stakeholders – team owners, media commentators, equipment and apparel manufacturers, civic boosters, and the like. This means that in the sports press there is little room for news that doesn't promote the industry. After all, you don't create a positive atmosphere of consumption with a lot of critical news of the sort that calls into question the fundamental nature and functioning of the sports industry. This notion of 'consumption' is crucial to my argument that the sports section is the nearly exclusive *promotional domain* of the big-time sports business. (Lowes, 1999: 99)

As Lowes points out, the idea that sports journalism will support the interests of those with material interest in the popularity of the sport (like the reporters themselves), is not based simply on common interest, convenience and tradition – it is an ideology, rendered as natural and inevitable. For a sports writer, to criticise the Super Bowl in any substantial way would be like a mainstream American political reporter criticising democracy; not so much an option which is 'not allowed', as something which is not an option in the first place, but rather, simply unthinkable. From this kind of perspective, the way that Gonzo journalism frames sport, as compared to the way sport is usually deployed in mass-media contexts, can be seen as a kind of cultural dissent, as well as in terms of the performance of a 'receptivity' of discourses of sport to excluded, 'negative' ideas.

It is worth noting, however, that Thompson does not uncomplicatedly present his own approach to being a professional sportswriter as implicitly ideal, correct, or even universally desirable. The narrative voice here is at times employed to emphasise the limits of the non-linear structure of the piece by signalling the need for a return from a tangential or parenthetical point, paragraph or section. On these occasions, however, Thompson can often be seen as repeating the sarcastic evocation of the applicable standards of 'professional' practice, as when he moves the narrative on from a fantasy

of questioning anti-doping Congressman Harley Stagers about drugs, football, and 'The playing fields of West Virginia' (while at the same time making it clear that the interview was a fiction):

Ah, Jesus ... another bad tangent. Somewhere in the back of my mind I recall signing a contract that said I would never do this kind of thing again; one of the conditions of my turning pro was a clause about swearing off gibberish ... (Thompson, 1980: 70)

Allegations of gibberish aside, however, the relationship of Thompson's Gonzo professionalism to the practice of journalism is complicated in this piece by the possibility that at least in some sense, this feature, in dealing with issues of drugs and exploitation in professional football, may be seen as providing a more 'professional' journalism than that offered by those who sat in the press lounge and reproduced the public relations material produced by the professionals of the NFL. This construction is perhaps based more on ideas of 'journalism' than the specific ideas of sports journalism, but the Gonzo piece can be seen as supplying some 'hard' sports news in among the leeches, the drinking, and the preaching of gospel from hotel balconies, which may trump the journalistic efforts of the pack, even if they did provide fuller and livelier accounts of the details of the game.

Critics of sports journalism have gone so far as to allege, in any case, that providing the so-called 'play-by-play' account of any sporting contest, in the form of a dramatic narrative of one kind or another, was rendered redundant in print journalism by the assumed superiority of broadcasting for such purposes. The rise of television as the preferred popular method of 'experiencing' the game, comes to mean that far from clichés of play descriptions and recycled pool quotes that don't have any substance, the focus of written forms of sports journalism should and must be context: 'While television offers the immediacy of the live sports event, it is the scene-setting, the pre- and post-event analysis and any attendant scandal or controversy that newspapers are

able to help sustain and run with' (Boyle, 2006: 54). Even in confirming the need for print journalism to provide the kind of analysis and ongoing news coverage for which print is conventionally seen as having the natural advantage over television, accounts like this nonetheless limit their conception of suitable context and narrative to within the conventional journalistic boundaries of the sport in question.

Sports journalism is more like entertainment or fashion news, which is ultimately expected not to criticise the underlying structures, ideological and otherwise, of the industry on which it depends, as well as not to spoil the readers' enjoyment of material that is not necessarily expected to be 'real news' anyway:

This is the sense of the old saying about the sports pages being the 'playpen' of the newspaper – what is reported here doesn't really matter because it's 'just' sports, what the late sportscaster Howard Cosell disparagingly called 'the toy department of life'. Only hard news stories merit attention ... What appears in the sports section, then, is rather innocuous regarding what matters in society – the sports section exists apart from real news as a fantasy world, one of pleasure and escape from everyday life, and it shouldn't be sullied with reportage critical of the major-league sports industry. (Lowes, 1999: 100-1)

Whether this is (self-)censorship or simply niche-interest journalism, the rejection of the need to be critical of the power/money structures of sport is one aspect of the conventional professionalism of the sports journalist which is depicted, in Gonzo, as implicitly insulating these sports from their meanings and implications within wider cultural, political, mythical contexts.

The limits of professionalism generally, in terms of desirability, possibility and effectiveness, can be considered as in play within the Text of *Fear And Loathing At The Super Bowl*. It is perhaps possible to read here an examination of a complicated web of failures of 'professionalism' of various kinds. Thompson-the-character is a Gonzo professional, meaning that both his body and his writing are contaminated by unprofessional things. He writes about the professional journalists who are just

untalented hacks, and who are being manipulated by the publicity professionals whose job is to publicise the good and the meaningless, and to conceal the bad and the important (not unlike Nixon's 'professionals', in mission or morality). All of which happens because of a football game that is financially significant to the point of losing all other significance, being played by mercenary players who themselves are often physically contaminated with drugs which may enhance professional performance, but do not adhere to professional standards of competition.

This picture of a wider context of unstable 'professional' ideologies is of course a simplification, and in any case is an expression of only one of many possible approaches to reading the structure and content of the piece. It is, however, perhaps worth noting that there may be a discernible continuity here, in the multi-faceted, self-reflexive nature of the Gonzo assault on yet another prominent American cultural institution. And once again, there is an evocation of the inevitable but ignored porousness of these ideological and/or categorical boundaries to these excluded elements. (Drugs are unprofessional, after all, so why shouldn't 'unprofessionalism' operate like a drug/pharmakon in these contexts?)

Thompson-the-character's becoming persona non grata with the management of the Oakland Raiders is a part of the narrative of this piece which, of course, can (and should) be read in different ways and thus assigned different meanings and significances. The Gonzo Text can, however, be considered as deploying this narrative thread as a prominent part of a direct critique of the structural inadequacies of professional sports journalism. Just as the political press corps was shown to be structurally incapable of supplying adequate coverage of the 1972 Presidential Election campaigns (see previous chapter), the sporting press is here shown to be incapable of

holding ‘the world of football’ properly to account. The lack of critical independence among journalists who cover sport is a persistent structural problem which has often been noted by both practitioners and commentators on sports journalism:

The routine sources of the sports journalist provide the bread and butter of sports news and are not only fed from a network of contacts that a journalist attempts to develop over his or her career, but more and more through the public relations arms of commercial sports organisations. (Boyle & Haynes, 2000: 168)

The need for the cooperation of such organisations in order for the journalist to function at all, let alone critically or, even worse, investigatively, complicates any possibility of incorporating ‘watchdog journalism’ elements into the job routine of the sports journalist.

Thompson-the-character is deployed in the narrative to illustrate some aspects of these structural problems in relation to the controversial issue, both then and now, of drug use in sport¹⁶. As a representative of the counter-culture, or at least of an ostensibly counter-cultural publication, he is at a disadvantage in terms of unproblematic journalistic access. This is made clear in Thompson’s account of his first visit to the Raider practice field, in which he includes a reported conversation which he overhears between another sportswriter and Al Davis, general manager and de facto (pending litigation) owner of the Oakland Raiders:

‘His name’s Thompson’, replied *Chronicle* sportswriter Jack Smith. ‘He’s a writer for *Rolling Stone*’.

‘The Rolling Stones? Jesus Christ! What’s he *doing* here? Did *you* bring him?’

‘No, he’s writing a big article. *Rolling Stone* is a magazine, Al. It’s different from the Rolling Stones; they’re a rock music group ...’ (Thompson, 1980: 63)

Smith’s attempt to convey a sense of Thompson’s reputation with reference to *Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas* is similarly ineffective:

‘Don’t worry, Al. Thompson’s okay. He wrote a good book about Las Vegas’.

¹⁶ For an overview of this ongoing ‘problem’, considered in terms of wider contexts of sports culture, rather than solely in terms of individual acts of ‘cheating’, see Stewart and Smith (2008).

Good God! I thought. That's it ... If they read that book I'm finished ... Davis glanced over his shoulder at me, then spoke back to Smith: 'Get the bastard out of here. I don't trust him'. (Thompson, 1980: 63)

What is happening here in the piece is particularly interesting in the context of this enquiry. Beyond the repeated thematic of the essentially quixotic expulsion of the outsider from the sanctum, there is an ironic edge to this, in that a sport with a known drug problem won't tolerate the presence of a journalist who might understand drugs. And, I should stress, this is depicted as a question of the taboo power of 'drugs', without (much) reliance on related issues of political dissent or cultural conformity.

Thompson uses the Gonzo method of including a transcript of an audio recording of himself and several Raiders team members, and prefaces it with a note on formatting which makes the prominence of 'drugs' in his interactions with the Raiders very clear:

Under normal circumstances I'd identify all of the voices in this heavily edited tape transcript – but for reasons that will soon become obvious if they aren't already, I decided that it would probably be more comfortable for all of us if I lumped all the player voices under one name: 'Raider'. This takes a bit of an edge off the talk, but it also makes it harder for the NFL security watchdogs to hassle some good people and red-line their names for hanging around with a dope fiend. (Thompson, 1980: 66)

The intersection between drugs and sport is examined in some detail in this piece, within a context of the impossibility of the relevant issues being adequately addressed by mainstream sports journalists. The catch-22 expulsion of an expert like Thompson, for possessing a reputation tainted by precisely this illicit expertise, is but one thread of this.

Exactly what threat Thompson the dope fiend might pose to the purity of the NFL is open to question, working off the reasonable assumption that NFL players would be unlikely either to want or to need to use him as a source of illicit pharmacology. Much of the substance of the relevant popular conceptions of the ideas of 'drugs' are,

however, as I have previously discussed, not founded on logic, and not significantly influenced by reason (see Chapter One), and the complexities of this particular ideological battleground are only enhanced by the overlaying of discursive frameworks of professional sport, political debate and media coverage:

Any professional athlete who talks to a sportswriter about ‘drugs’ – even with the best and most constructive intentions – is taking a very heavy risk. There is a definite element of hysteria about drugs of any kind in pro football today, and a casual remark – even a *meaningless* remark – across the table in a friendly hometown bar can lead, very quickly, to a seat in the witness chair in front of a congressional committee. (Thompson, 1980: 69)

Thompson takes pains, however, to make it clear that this is not an attempt at a hard-line crackdown on illegal/improper/unfair drug use in football. This hysteria is seen as more of a wild goose chase at this point – targeting actual *Rolling Stone* correspondents and hypothetical athletes who make ill-advised casual remarks – than a serious investigation, aimed at stopping illicit drug use.

The piece seems to go so far as to allege that the whole panic is just a manufactured publicity stunt, in a year when political publicity was a hard thing to come by for those politicians not involved directly in the Watergate hearings:

1973 was a pretty dull year for congressmen. The Senate’s Watergate Committee had managed, somehow, to pre-empt most of the ink and air-time ... and one of the few congressmen who managed to lash his own special gig past that barrier was an apparently senile sixty-seven-year-old ex-sheriff and football coach from West Virginia named Harley Staggers. (Thompson, 1980: 69)

There is perhaps some further irony to be discerned in this perceived problem of drugs in sport being implicitly contrasted with the corrupt activities involved in the Watergate scandal. The juxtaposition emphasises how much more significant Watergate is, inasmuch as the impact of the apportionment of political power is much more direct, wider in scope, and less dependant on individual consent than the impact of football results.

The comparison also draws attention to the relative lack of evidence, or action, in this latest drugs-in-sport story:

Somewhere in the spastic interim between John Dean and ‘Bob’ Haldeman, Congressman Staggers managed to collar some story-starved sportswriter from the New York *Times* long enough to announce that his committee – the House Subcommittee on Investigations – had stumbled on such a king-hell wasps’ nest of evidence in the course of their probe into ‘the use of drugs by athletes’ that the committee was prepared – or *almost* prepared, pending further evidence – to come to grips with their natural human duty and offer up a law, very soon, that would require individual urinalysis on all professional athletes and especially pro football players. (Thompson, 1980: 69)

The self-aggrandising tactics of politicians notwithstanding, this is not unlike Thompson’s previously discussed condemnation of Avery Brundage’s anachronistically purist conception of the meaning of amateur status for skiers.

The problem is not so much that Staggers, or Brundage for that matter, are actually ‘wrong’, within the framework of their representations in the Text, but rather that they are, in a perhaps overly simplified sense, so ignorant and out of touch with the conditions which they seek to condemn, that they are almost implicitly irrelevant in any reasoned debate. In this type of context of institutional power, however, irrelevance to the highest possible form of the debate is obviously not the same as impotence in the matter being debated. In any case, both men’s claims, notwithstanding their questionable merit, are implicitly contrasted with ostensibly more important problems such as Watergate, racial tension or, indeed, wider issues surrounding drugs outside ‘the world of sport’.

In the context of drugs and football in *Fear And Loathing At The Super Bowl*, however, Thompson emphasises the role of an uninformed and uncomfortable sports press in the creation of an irrational hysteria:

Most sportswriters are so blank on the subject of drugs that you can only talk to them about it at your own risk – which is easy enough, for me, because I get a

boot out of seeing their eyes bulge; but it can be disastrous to a professional football player who makes the casual mistake of assuming that a sportswriter knows what he's talking about when he uses a word like 'crank'. (Thompson, 1980: 69)

The logistics of the coverage of the Super Bowl are depicted as creating a temporary community of sports journalists in the days leading up to the game. Thompson-the-author, within a tangle of interrelated contexts of management and ownership, gambling, labour relations and drug hysteria, uses the depiction of interactions between Thompson-the-character and other sportswriters in the pack, in order to relate these issues to the qualities of the journalists who (should) report on them.

In this piece, for example, Thompson-the-character once again convinces some ignorant local rube of an unsettling story from the other, deviant America, designed to make the listener uncomfortable, but this time he does it based on his own reputation rather than a fake identity, and his victims are not part of the general public – they are his fellow sportswriters:

There is also – at least in the minds of at least two dozen gullible sportswriters at the Super Bowl – the ugly story of how I spent three or four days prior to Super Week shooting smack in a \$7 a night motel room on the seawall in Galveston. (Thompson, 1980: 68)

This story, told on a whim in the press lounge of the hotel and later confirmed to a local sports reporter, gets Thompson-the-character shunned by a journalist who, it is implied, should know better, professionally speaking: 'He nodded glumly as I moved away in the crowd ... and although I saw him three or four times a day for the rest of that week, he never spoke to me again' (Thompson, 1980: 68-9). Here, Thompson-the-character's prank is deployed as part of the depiction not of paranoia among a wider public, but of ignorance, and perhaps some fear, among the ranks of sports journalists. In the context of 'the world of football' the journalists are depicted, explicitly, as being in some respects part of the problem themselves.

In the fabric of *Fear And Loathing At The Super Bowl*, political grandstanding and journalistic ignorance about drugs are deployed as part of a critique of the institutional character of professional football in America. The ways in which more of the contextual material is related directly and explicitly to ‘the world of football’ can perhaps be read as helping to construct a Text which is in some respects more tightly focussed on the sport in question, as a cultural object, than some other pieces of Gonzo sports journalism. What I mean to imply by this is that football is in some sense more prominent in this piece than, for example, horseracing is in *The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent And Depraved*, speaking not in terms of narrative, but thematically, and in terms of explicit, rather than implicit, social and cultural links. Although this is a matter of degree of focus, obviously open to interpretation, it is perhaps profitable to consider the ways in which this piece can be seen as reporting from the conventional ‘world of football’. This framework, of myriad thematic and narrative threads, woven into a depiction of a wider socio-cultural context, (as usual,) is in this case grounded within the admittedly shakily defined borders of the social and cultural landscape of American professional football. And said framework is important to reading the different aspects of ‘the world of football’ as they are depicted, and interrelated, in *Fear And Loathing At The Super Bowl*.

One such aspect is the mass of mainstream sports journalists, whose apparent failings when it comes to the so-called ‘drug problem’ are but one aspect of their deployment in this wider critique; a critique which may be read as addressing not necessarily American society at large – except by implication – but, primarily, the complex and spectacular myths and practical realities of the NFL, as both culture and as business institution. In introducing the transcript of his session watching a game-film with some of the Raiders,

Thompson points out, ostensibly in passing, that the writers who cover football from the box, while they may have a higher level of understanding, or at least background knowledge, than their readers, are still not on the same plane of expertise as the players: ‘The purpose of the film session was to show me some of the things – in slow motion and instant replay – that nobody in the stands or the press box will ever understand’ (Thompson, 1980: 65). This may seem a very minor point, and in some respects that is certainly a reasonable assertion, but beyond the evocation of the distance between taking part and spectating, this can perhaps be seen as yet another aspect of the implicit demolition of the ‘expertise’ which may be considered as a key aspect of the professional status and ideology of sports journalists, and possibly, by extension, of the edifice of the NFL/sports-media complex.

Thompson later drives this point home in the context of the account of Thompson-the-character’s gambling on the Super Bowl, based on the belief that the Dolphins would certainly win, which proved to be the case. He maintains that this potentially highly profitable certainty was founded on the kind of information that can be acquired only by being there and which, paradoxically given his profession, he says the media, structurally speaking, can’t provide:

There are a lot of factors intrinsic to the nature of the Super Bowl that make it far more predictable than regular season games, or even playoffs – but they are not the kind of factors that can be sensed or understood at a distance of 2000 or even twenty miles, on the basis of any wisdom or information that filters out from the site through the rose-coloured, booze-bent media-filter that passes for ‘world-wide coverage’ at these spectacles. (Thompson, 1980: 76)

These links between the press and the nature of the sport itself, which I have read as critical of sports journalists, are examples that are selected both for the purpose of examining this aspect of the complex depiction of football within the piece, and in order to illustrate more general aspects of the Gonzo methodologies used to create and structure that depiction.

In this case I would contend that there is a discernible continuity in the Gonzo method of extensively, perhaps almost chaotically interconnecting a wide variety of different contexts and contextual approaches, whether used to place a sport in the context of wider society, as seen in, for example, *The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent And Depraved*, or to more explicitly and directly place a sporting event like the Super Bowl in a wider context of ‘the world of football’. Tracing these kinds of interconnected and mutually-entangled thematic threads, such as the representations of sports journalists and sports journalism, is complicated by the piece’s non-linear structures. It is, however, both useful in theorising Gonzo, particularly in the context(s) of sports journalism, and, arguably, essential in order to try to construct a reading of how football is here constructed within the Gonzo Text.

This is not to say that it is necessary (or wise, or possible) to try to map out all the aspects of the interrelation of themes of drugs, gambling, sports journalism, ‘star’ athletes, the big money aspects of football etc., in *Fear And Loathing At The Super Bowl*, in order to be able somehow to isolate different aspects of the piece, the better to try to analyse them in some sense individually. There is, however, theoretical profit to be had in examining some of the different links between the themes, myths and related discussions in this piece, in order to examine, in a sense holistically, the overall structure, and how it is constructed.

For example, aspects of the drugs issue are placed in the context of a wider discussion of contract negotiations, labour relations and, generally, the exploitation of the players by the owners, through placing the threat of mass urine-testing for football players in the context of the affairs of the Players’ Association:

Even in the face of what most of the player reps call a ‘legalized and unregulated monopoly’ with the power of what amounts to ‘life or death’ over their individual fates and financial futures in the tight little world of the National Football Leagues, the Players’ Association since 1970 has managed to challenge the owners on a few carefully chosen issues ... The two most obvious, or at least most frequently mentioned by players, are the pension fund (which the owners now contribute to about twice as heavily as they did before the threatened strike in 1970) and the players’ unilateral rejection, last year, of the ‘urinalysis proposal’ which the owners and Rozelle were apparently ready and willing to arrange for them, rather than risk any more public fights with Congress about things like TV blackouts and anti-trust exemptions. (Thompson, 1980: 79)

Thompson then uses a quote from a player who asserts that the sports journalists would never submit to mass-urinalysis, since it is degrading, in order to frame this type of hysterical measure in terms of hypocrisy, as well as simple injustice:

I agreed with Keating that mass-urinalysis in the press box at halftime would undoubtedly cause violence and a blizzard of vicious assaults on the NFL in the next morning’s papers ... but, after thinking about it for a while, the idea struck me as having definite possibilities if applied on a broad enough basis: Mandatory urine-tests for all congressmen and senators at the end of each session, for instance. Who could predict what kind of screaming hell might erupt if Rep. Harley Staggers was suddenly grabbed by two Pinkerton men in a hallway of the US Capitol and dragged – in full view of tourists, newsmen and several dozen of his shocked and frightened colleagues – into a nearby corner and forced to piss in a test tube? (Thompson, 1980: 79)

I have quoted this section at considerable length here primarily because of its utility for present purposes as an interesting example of another familiar aspect of Gonzo methodologies; that of illustrating and invoking aspects of a group of various themes and concerns – drugs and the NFL players and the NFL owners and the press and Congress and so on – in one bizarre, evocative Gonzo fantasy.

It should be noted that the use of elements of fiction within football journalism is not a revolutionary incursion into an ostensibly ‘objective’ journalistic tradition. Considering a typical, fictional ‘football story’ from a magazine from the 1930’s, the cultural historian of American sport, Michael Oriard, points out that:

While all this material, both textual and visual, stood apart from the football journalism – fiction, as opposed to fact – the boundaries between the two were never clearly drawn. Football ‘fact’ always tended toward exaggeration: stalwart

athletes and their savvy coaches were routinely idealized by sportswriters, columnists, and broadcasters. (Oriard, 2001: 55)

The outlandish and fantastical being used to illustrate and contextualise a hard edge of social and political critique, which might in itself be constructed as a classically distinctive Gonzo method, is used in the case of the image of mass urine-testing of sports journalists, ostensibly within the context(s) of football. The notion that football journalism has a traditionally loose relationship with 'truth' is mentioned here not so much directly to inform the reading of this method, but more simply to reinforce the sense that the borders which Gonzo toys with and transgresses against are neither so immutable nor so inviolable as they may appear.

I think it may also be important to make clear here that the continuities I have tried to theorise and illustrate, between Gonzo when it is focussed directly on a sport and Gonzo when it is focussed indirectly on a sport, are, of course, problematic. While there are differences of degrees of focus, in this sense, between different pieces of Gonzo sports journalism, I believe it is in the nature of these mythical constructions of sports as closed systems that the borders around any given sport, and/or around sport in general, are intrinsically unstable. This is true in the context of Gonzo, and in other social, political and cultural arenas, generally, in which sport can, as in Gonzo, be deployed in contexts which might not conventionally be emphasised within the borders of 'the world of sport'.

Oriard, for example, points out that during the period when this Gonzo piece was written, some new sites of struggle over the meanings of football emerged:

Post-1950s football acquired some brand new meanings, as in the Vietnam era when the game was politicized as never before. A handful of sports-conscious leftist critics arrived at the bizarre notion that football was fundamentally a game of seizing territory (as if winners were determined by total yardage rather than the final score), countered on the political right by the equally bizarre notion that

football, properly managed, could halt the chaos of the times by putting blacks back in their proper place and restoring coaches' paternal authority over their players. (Oriard, 2001: 367)

The supposedly relatively stable meaning(s) of football can be contested, just as the supposedly solid boundaries around what is and is not allowed to be part of 'the world of football' are also not as stable or impermeable as they appear. These structural instabilities, around the ideas of 'sports' in general and of specific sports, are revealed/depicted/constructed by the kind of close examination which Gonzo performs on them, and are illuminated still further by comparing, to put it perhaps overly simply, the Gonzo which notices such borders with the Gonzo that doesn't. The stylistic, thematic and methodological consistencies across Gonzo sports journalism can perhaps be seen to illustrate that football, as mythic construction and social context, has no 'purity'. In a sense, it has no containment, keeping the inside in and the outside out, anymore than Louisville society, or amateur skiing.

As with drugs, so with the concept of context itself. The key idea in play is, I contend, what I have repeatedly been calling 'receptivity' as a shorthand term for often complex processes performing the indirect destruction of systemic, institutional, mythical, categorical (and other kinds of) borders around implicitly purifiable, explicitly closed spaces of any kind. The boundaries of these spaces, whether they are physical, ideological, conceptual etc. are destabilised through the introduction of inadmissible, undecidable contaminants, again of whatever kind (see especially Chapter One). The use of this kind of intellectual demonstration is, as I have discussed, intimately linked with the kind of subjectivity which is pushed to such radical extremes in Gonzo, where such subjectivity contends, mythically, with the nominally objective 'reality' in which these unstable borders are constructed. One articulation of this is the likes of the message, perhaps implicit in *Fear And Loathing At The Super Bowl*, that drugs are,

undeniably and basically unavoidably, a part of football, but this is only a specific, simple example of receptivity. Football is shown to be subject to mythical incursions of various types of corruption, relating not just to drugs but to the incursions of commercialism of various kinds, conflicts between owners, players, the media and politicians, and generally to disputes and pressures and influences which do not, and, allegedly, should not, intrude on the sanctity of the game.

As critics of American sport have noted, football is sacred, not just to fans and sports journalists, but generally, in wider American cultural contexts. Schwartz observes that: ‘Attacks on football are as un-American as assaults on Mom, apple pie, and the flag – quintessential cultural icons’ (Schwartz, 1998: 139). Regarding the development of the prominence of football as just such a cultural icon, Oriard goes even further, noting that: ‘Football in the periodical press by the 1950s was not simply American but America itself’ (Oriard, 2001: 195). The Gonzo method, however, destroys the myth of any sporting ‘purity’ around the Super Bowl, interweaving and mutually entangling aspects of its receptivity to that which it mythically rejects, including a sportswriter who jokes about shooting smack and explains in detail why there’s no point actually going to a football game anyway, even to cover it as a journalist, rather than watching it on television like the newest generations of fans:

After ten years of trying it both ways – and especially after watching the last wretched Super Bowl game from a choice seat in the ‘press section’ very high above the fifty-yard line – I hope to Christ I never again succumb to whatever kind of weakness or madness it is that causes a person to endure the incoherent hell that comes with going out to a cold and rainy stadium for three hours on a Sunday afternoon and trying to get involved with whatever seems to be happening down there on that far-below field. (Thompson, 1980: 76)

The point I am trying to make here is, once again, on the nature of receptivity. Thompson-the-character and Gonzo-the-method are useful for explaining this idea, I think, because they are, textually speaking, ideas which are ‘outlawed’ from certain

discourses and places and categories and contexts, into which the Texts nonetheless (in a sense) insert them, and represent the performance of their 'belonging'. For exactly the same reason, receptivity is, I hope, useful for explaining and illustrating Gonzo, as a case study in such cultural operations.

Whichever explanation is considered as supporting the other, I hope that this discussion of Gonzo and sport can be seen as illuminating these apparent continuities, between Thompson-the-character's various incursions, the drugs which also go where they are supposedly unwelcome, and, in the context of the borders of sports journalism, allowing in contexts from 'the outside' of sport. It is perhaps helpful to note that arguments about the 'purity' of journalism have been known to contest the full membership of sports journalism itself, as practice and as body of work (see Wenner (1989: 44) on aspects of the history of sports journalism's second-class status within academia). Counter-arguments have been made which reference the capacity of sports journalism to supply the kind of socially relevant commentary which is, I would contend, both Gonzo's stock in trade, and among Gonzo sports journalism's most prominent concerns:

If journalism is about disseminating information and facilitating discussion on a range of social, political, economic and cultural issues pertinent to a society, then sports, however much some academics may dislike it, is part of that mix. At times sport can be trivial and unimportant, at others a symbolically significant cultural form that is an indicator of wider social and cultural forces in society. (Boyle, 2006: 13)

This type of argument is in sharp contrast with the conception of sports journalism as part of the complex of money interests which comprise big-time sport.

The power structures in question, essentially a triumvirate of television, a league like the NFL, and corporate sponsors/advertisers, can be viewed as all acting in profitable concert while:

Sports journalism pitches in by providing free promotion in the guise of information. Sports reporting could be subsumed by business and financial news; nevertheless, sport has been privileged with its own niche in print and on the air. In daily newspapers and local news broadcasts sport narratives share space with stories regarded as newsworthy and important to the conduct of everyday life. (Schwartz, 1998: 44)

Whether the genre of sports journalism is defined in these critical terms or not, issues of promotionality are contested at the borders of the genre, and are at issue in Gonzo sports journalism's examination of conventional sports journalism. Gonzo is again seen as performing the limits of the genre within which it is, or may be, nominally situated, and again the method of transcending these limits is thematically and methodologically tied to receptivity. As with drugs sneaking into the bloodstream (or urine, as the case may be) of the 'professional', so with Gonzo and excluded contexts slipping inside sports journalism, and so also with various mythically excludable corruptions entering into the 'naturally' receptive borders of the Super Bowl, of football, and of sport itself.

Conclusion: The Final Wisdom

This is getting pretty heavy ... so I should cut back and explain, at this point, that *Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas* is a *failed experiment* in gonzo journalism. My idea was to buy a fat notebook and record the whole thing, *as it happened*, then send in the notebook for publication – without editing. That way, I felt, the eye & mind of the journalist would be functioning as a camera ... But this is a hard thing to do, and in the end I found myself imposing an essentially fictional framework on what began as a piece of straight/crazy journalism. 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, 1980: 114-5)

Writing was what Hunter called the 'rock in his sock', the one thing that he had as a tool, but also as a weapon. It doesn't cost much, you just put a huge rock in a large white sock and swing it around. People will leave you alone, and you will also have the confidence of having a serious weapon. (Thompson, 2007: 26)

The definition of Gonzo journalism is, of course, ultimately subjective. Gonzo is a journalistic methodology. It is also a body of work produced through that methodology. And it is also, though perhaps less prominently, considered at times as a philosophy applicable to life in general, as well as to journalistic practice. This no doubt has roots in Thompson's cultural prominence as a figure famous for his lifestyle as well as his work, and also, no doubt, in some of the more introspective, philosophical, even exhortatory aspects of his writing. Categorical labels like 'Gonzo', deployed for the purposes of the description or even the taxonomy of cultural objects, are subjectively determined and thus inherently unstable, to a certain extent, but, as I have argued, the subjective ambiguities of 'Gonzo journalism' are not limited to this implicit subjectivity. The definition of New Journalism, for example, is subjective and ambiguous, like the definition of a magical realist short story or indeed of a neuropharmacology article, a sports-news broadcast or any other cultural form, but New Journalism is not a literary label which is prone to being interpreted as a self-help philosophy. Gonzo, however – method, corpus, brand, style, oeuvre – becomes 'The Gonzo Way' in the worshipful hands of Anita Thompson.

Following Hunter Thompson's death in 2005, cultural processes related to memorializing and commemorating both his life and his work, which remain difficult to separate in a context of popular culture, further complicated the cultural existence of Gonzo journalism. His widow's memoir casts Thompson as a kind of guru, revealing a path to right-living, which she tellingly refers to as the Gonzo Way:

Analysis of his literary and journalistic legacies, legacies that will last long after all of us reading this are dead, is for another book. This volume is geared toward the other aspect of his legacy: you, Hunter's readers, and particularly those of you who are interested in living up to your unique potential in individual style with the vigor and curiosity and courage to fight for your beliefs and for your neighbors well into old age. I know when I'm not living the Gonzo Way – it's usually when I'm tired, or start to worry about what others expect of me or what they think of me, and the fear sets in. But it takes me only a few moments to remember the things that Hunter taught me, to reread a passage or two, and then I am calm and grateful again. The Gonzo Way is an attitude rather than a set of rules. (Thompson, 2007: 15-6)

This evocation of Gonzo as some type of immaterial essence and/or set of quasi-spiritual teachings and/or indescribable but unmistakable 'attitude', is apparently based in Thompson's writing's cult status, but also doubtlessly has roots in some of the same aspects of that writing which prompted the cult status in the first place.

Anita Thompson makes it clear that the essence of Gonzo which she wishes to try to communicate in her book is not focused on the decadent excesses, pharmacological and otherwise, which are often associated with Gonzo (Thompson, 2007: 14), but neither is it about his life, on a personal level, as though what she wished to offer were based on personal knowledge of a private existence of Hunter Thompson the Gonzo husband. The Gonzo Way is to be found, primarily, in Thompson's Gonzo writing: 'His attitude, his spirit, and his essence will live forever in his work, and through those of us who paid attention and try to pass on what he taught us' (Thompson, 2007: 22). This is an interesting approach to take to reading the works of a journalist, even a literary

journalist, but, as I have asserted throughout this discussion, one of the most interesting things about Gonzo may be that, as a hybrid and undecidable Text, it is approached from a wide variety of perspectives, and deployed in a panoply of cultural positions. Gonzo can be read as journalism, fiction, autobiography, political activism/propaganda and even, it would seem, as a philosophy to live by¹⁷.

Or not. Gonzo-as-lifestyle is read by some in this way, but to others, Thompson-the-character's physical and emotional erosion, or even degradation, under the influence of 'drugs', work and/or grotesque socio-cultural environments is itself the conveyor of a presumed primary meaning or 'message', within the Gonzo Text. Consider how journalist and teacher Stephanie Shapiro assimilates Thompson, as a supposed practitioner of New Journalism, into her arguments regarding the operation of American literary journalism as an organ of social control, to be read primarily in terms of morality and mythic constructions of the 'original values' (Shapiro, 2006: 102) within American society:

The New Journalists, while hardly fire-and-brimstone bible-thumpers, called attention to the license of romantic myth. In a sense they were demanding, however obliquely, a return to a world in which predestination is acknowledged and where the threat of God's wrath controls our excessive tendencies. Thompson clearly suggests at the end of 'The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved' that he is one of the decadent and depraved. Though his sprees are legendary, Thompson's confession that he is no better than the mob bespeaks a desire for some higher form of control. He wants the option of a virtuous path; without God's tempering presence, he cannot have it. (Shapiro, 2006: 103)

Shapiro sees Thompson's debauched and unwell character's presence as a kind of condemnation-by-example, performing New Journalism's critique of unchecked, amoral, win-at-all-costs capitalist ideologies (Shapiro, 2006: 103), through a portrayal

¹⁷ Another example of this theoretical flexibility, less directly relevant to present purposes but illustrative of the ways in which Gonzo 'gets around', is Bladen's definition of a Gonzo method of delivering academic lectures (2012).

of unchecked decadence and unlimited excess, and the inevitably horrible consequences thereof:

Yet even as the concept of sin is mocked in the authors' portraits, we can see predestination in action in the swift tailspins of their subjects who included themselves. In their tales of decadence, the New Journalists were preaching a profoundly moral message. In effect they were asking us to set the original American myths back on course. (Shapiro, 2006: 104)

I would consider reading the Gonzo Text as operating in this way, comprehensible primarily as a morality play, to be a somewhat restrictive, limited approach – and not just because Thompson-the-character does not, generally, face 'justice' within these works. What is interesting, however, is that the writing and attendant mythology which makes up the Gonzo Text, can be deployed in such a manner, to such a purpose.

That the Gonzo works of Hunter Thompson make up a complex Text which is open to a wide variety of interpretations, in the pursuit not of an ultimate meaning but of a fuller understanding, was, hopefully, already evident without these references to evidence that some readings may discern philosophical and even (pseudo-)spiritual guidance and support within Gonzo. That being said, it is perhaps interesting to note the possibility of semiotic associations between the substance of such interpretations, and the radical subjectivity that is not just a Gonzo trademark, but also a key thematic link from Gonzo as a body of journalistic work to the idea of a Gonzo way or attitude or spirit, which might be considered as in some sense 'the teachings' of Hunter Thompson.

In assessing Gonzo's extended examination of the concept of the American Dream, Thompson scholar William Stephenson has noted that:

Thompson was very well read and extremely articulate in print, but he was not a philosopher or even an intellectual. He was, first and foremost, a journalist, who preferred to seek the Dream and report on the quest rather than to theorize about it. He never sat down to formulate his ideas systematically in the abstract; instead, he composed everything in response to some experience. He was a materialist and an empiricist, seeking the foundations of his writing in the lives of actual human

beings and in the evidence of his sometimes chemically deranged senses. (Stephenson, 2012: 105)

And yet, there is a book of his way of life, and a volume of interviews with Thompson was published with the title *Interviews with Hunter S. Thompson: Ancient Gonzo Wisdom* (Thompson, 2009). The mythic figure of Thompson as hero and guru and counter-cultural icon and poster boy for non-conformity has roots in Gonzo's content, but also in the subjective nature of Gonzo's viewpoint and style – though of course, in some ways all these elements are inextricably entangled in the Text.

Perhaps the apparent semiotic tensions between the ideas of the Gonzo journalist, and of Hunter Thompson as inspirational figure, teaching by the example(s) encoded in his writing, are illusory. This idea of some kind of conflict comes down to subjectively applied labels, after all, but these aspects of the Text do seem to emphasise the significance of the performance of subjectivity, indeed the construction of the self within the Gonzo Text:

A great paradox of Thompson's work is that all this *bricolage* occurs in the name of an authentic self. Thompson was working in the individualist tradition of Emerson and Thoreau, but he adapted it to his own hedonistic tastes and secular mindset, and reworked it for a postmodern, image-driven age of the spectacle. His work does not aggrandize an already formulated ego; instead it dramatizes the processes of change and breakdown that occur when someone *tries* to become or remain a free individual in the America of the mid-twentieth century and beyond. (Stephenson, 2012: 32)

The voice and the viewpoint can be seen to communicate in the realms of the individual and of the personal, whether the work is dealing with a horse-race, a trip to Vegas or a Presidential election. This type of reading of the Text is linked to the personal, individual responses – such as inspiration, or mere hero-worship – which the myth and Text of Gonzo, and the popularly understood character of Thompson, have been understood to induce. All of this could perhaps be usefully summarised under the notion that some elements of Gonzo journalism such as the legend of Thompson's persona and

the subjectivity of his viewpoint, as well as the exhortatory (for want of a better word) nature of some of the style and content, can perhaps be read – even if not as directly as in *The Gonzo Way* (Thompson, 2007) – as a kind of ‘example’, or at least as endowed with an element of persuasive force, of however ambiguous a character.

An Honest Living

It is not my intention to present this approach to the Text as any more important than any other, but it is an interesting aspect of issues relating to the narrative voice of Gonzo and its unusual ‘authority’. It is also inextricably entangled in the representation of ideas of the individual and of individual identity within society, which is a prominent concern of both Gonzo and of American culture in general. Gonzo represents, again and again, examinations of these themes of self-creation, of self-determination, of myriad facets of quintessentially American mythologies of freedom as/and self-reliance. The individual is central, but Thompson’s idea of the autonomous individual, the free citizen, which he explicitly derives from ideologies of America, is an idea which is in a complex state of tension with the corruptions and simple failings of the America on which he reports.

Many of the early, ostensibly pre-Gonzo pieces which Thompson selected as components of *The Great Shark Hunt* deal with the certain transformation and arguable decline of pieces of the American cultural landscape, weighing lost lifestyles and ideas against the benefits of various kinds of change. In the piece *Living in the time of Alger, Greeley, Debs* (Thompson, 1980: 395-400), Thompson depicted the grim future faced by members of a highly-skilled but vanishing workforce of non-union, itinerant labourers, as the economic life of the nation moved on without them. This might, at first

glance, seem like the subject matter of what could be a typical essentially human-interest story, towards the heavy end of the social-conscience spectrum; nostalgia mixed with sympathy, with perhaps some sense of regretful approval for progress, or at least an implicit nod to its inevitability. The account which Thompson produces of the changes to these industries and to the lifestyle of these men, however, in addition to the classic exercise of ‘putting a human face on the story’, contains direct discussion of ideas of the so-called ‘American way of life’, and the possible tensions between ideas of the necessity of change, and the guarantees of freedom, stability, opportunity, implicit in the American Dream. These are ideas that are reworked again and again in Gonzo, and the ways in which they are addressed by Thompson here, in a relatively short feature appearing in the *National Observer* in the summer of 1964, helps to inform a reading of these recurring themes.

Almost from the outset of this piece, Thompson explicitly links his ideas of journalism with these themes of the American Dream, and the American tragedies implicit in that dream’s limitations and failures. Thompson’s narrative voice makes this clear in the piece, following the described observation that a hotel desk clerk is suspicious of ‘just what sort of a journalist I was’ (Thompson, 1980: 396) to be visited at 4AM by a vagrant:

Which may be a valid question. But then somebody else might ask what sort of a journalist would spend six weeks travelling around the West and not write about Bobby Cleary, the tramp digger with no home and a downhill run to a guaranteed early grave; Bob Barnes, the half-deaf wildcat trucker who never understood that his life was a desperate game of musical chairs; or the lean, stuttering redhead from Pennsylvania who said his name was Ray and had hitchhiked West to find a place ‘where a man can still make an honest living’. (Thompson, 1980: 396)

The construction of a profile of a type, turning the disparate narratives of these men into an examination of the plight of a vanishing class of American worker, can perhaps be seen to move beyond the specificity of the type itself, toward more general themes

implicit in such stories: ‘These are the people who never got the message that rugged individualism has made some drastic adjustments in these hyper-organised times’ (Thompson, 1980: 396). The depiction here of both the people and the hyper-organised times they live in has wider implications, both socially, and ideologically. These aspects of the Text can help to inform readings of later Gonzo works regarding American progress and the American Dream.

There is a rich vein of nostalgic American mythology to be tapped here, presenting the sympathetic and familiar figures of those trained to fill an economic niche which structural changes have removed from the national landscape:

They are still living in the era of Horace Greeley, Horatio Alger and, in some cases, Eugene Debs. They want no part of ‘city living’, but they have neither the education nor the interest to understand why it is ever more difficult for them to make a living ‘out here in the open’. The demise of the easy-living, independent West has made them bitter and sometimes desperate. In the old days a man with a normal variety of skills could roll into any Western hamlet or junction and find an odd job or two that would pay his way and usually provide a little margin to spend with the local sports. (Thompson, 1980: 396-7)

This romanticisation, both of the itinerant labourer of American yesteryear and of the implicitly idealised West which was once such a hospitable environment for him, is a familiar mythic operation, deeply entangled in American traditions of rugged individualism.

That the present is a time of decline from the more honest livings that our fathers made is a myth perhaps as old as culture. In this American context, there is perhaps an implicit nostalgia for the greatness of one’s forebears, tied to hegemonic conceptions of patriotism and of American history, from the War of Independence to cowboys, to the Great Depression and beyond. It is worth noting that the men who are the focus of this piece are tied by their itinerant lifestyle to the potent American mythology of mobility,

which can perhaps be seen to extend as far back as pioneers and cattle drives, but which is prominent in the modern context in terms of myths of ‘the open road’:

The open road, then, is both a means to an end and an end in itself- that is, it represents both the promise of the American dream and its fulfillment. These multiple narratives of the open road coexist and mutually reinforce one another, collectively cementing the road's place at the heart of the American dream. (Leong, 2012: 307)

The fact that these men can no longer make their honest living, ‘on the road’ as it were, represents a collapse, over time, of a part of the American Dream. This can be seen to relate, in a sense, to conservative myths about the past in mainstream American culture, that advance the ideology that the price of present comforts, luxuries, security, has been paid with a loss of some freedom or tradition or authenticity or challenge which enriched the lives of previous generations.

While this kind of mythology is readily familiar, deployed to be read as a sad but inevitable aspect of progress, easily incorporated into dominant ideologies of capitalist expansion, it is not deployed here in this fashion. Instead Thompson uses this case study of a disadvantaged group to point toward a clear contradiction between the operation of the American economy and some of the ideologies of the ‘American way of life’ which are most frequently and potently evoked within American culture:

I returned to the Holiday Inn – where they have a swimming pool and air-conditioned rooms – to consider the paradox of a nation that has given so much to those who preach the glories of rugged individualism from the security of countless corporate sinecures, and so little to that diminishing band of yesterday’s refugees who still practise it, day by day, in a tough, rootless and sometimes witless style that most of us have long since been weaned away from. (Thompson, 1980: 400)

Once again, while I do not intend to point to some ultimate interpretation either of this extract, or of the piece from which it is taken, it is interesting to note that in this article, it is perhaps possible to discern an interest in confronting American hypocrisies surrounding the American Dream – not just representing the fallout of the dream’s

failings, but perhaps emphasising, even explicitly and directly, what a given story says about the dream, and about America.

As Thompson observed, these themes comprised a key element of his journalistic *métier*. Answering an interview question on his drug use, for example, Thompson said that: ‘Anyone who covers his beat for 20 years and his beat is ‘The Death of the American Dream’, needs every goddamned crutch he can find’ (Simonson, 1993, cited in Thompson, 2009: 178). Changes both in what it means to be an American and even in how to approach the question were a recurring theme in Thompson’s work, and early feature articles begin to demonstrate some of the structures and ideas through which Thompson examines these issues. It is perhaps possible to see, for example in an article about how the character of test pilots at Edwards Air Force Base had changed by 1969, some ideas and thematic threads which might be considered in relation to critiques of professionalism, ideas of edgework, and other prominent features of the Gonzo Text, as well as in terms of transformations of the structure(s) of the American Dream.

In Those Daring Young Men In Their Flying Machines ... Ain’t What They Used To Be! (Thompson, 1980: 429-36), as with the figures of rugged individualists made obsolete by changes to the West, Thompson again deals with reporting on the current state of a myth of some prominence in American culture – in this case that of the thrill-seeking, reckless, fearless aircraft test pilot:

Slow-moving travellers were frequently blown off the road by wildmen in leather jackets and white scarves, two-wheeled human torpedoes defying all speed limits and heedless of their own safety. Motorcycles were very popular toys with the pilots of that other, older era, and many an outraged citizen was jerked out of his bed at night by the awful roar of a large four-cylinder Indian beneath his daughter’s window. The image of the daredevil, speedball pilot is preserved in song and story, as it were, and in films like the Howard Hughes classic, *Hell’s Angels*. (Thompson, 1980: 431)

This myth, based on the past of military aircraft test pilots, ‘Back in the good old days, when men were men and might was right and the devil took the hindmost’ (Thompson, 1980: 431), is in sharp contrast to the modern, scientific, professional pilots of 1969.

The new breed of test pilots at Edwards represent a change in the culture of the modern military, and can be viewed as illustrating wider changes in American society:

The vintage-69 test pilot is a supercautious, supertrained, superintelligent monument to the computer age. He is a perfect specimen, on paper, and so confident of his natural edge on other kinds of men that you begin to wonder – after spending a bit of time in the company of test pilots – if perhaps we might not all be better off if the White House could be moved, tomorrow morning, to this dreary wasteland called Edwards Air Force Base. If nothing else, my own visit to the base convinced me that Air Force test pilots see the rest of us, perhaps accurately, as either physical, mental, or moral rejects. (Thompson, 1980: 431)

This cultural shift, from edgeworkers to bean-counters, is a mythic transformation with wider resonances in American culture, some of which are discussed elsewhere in this examination of Gonzo (see Chapter Two). Before the theorization of either Gonzo or edgework, it is interesting to note that Thompson already sets up thematic links between these types of modern professionals, and the corrupt, violent or otherwise malignant aspects of the idea(s) of America, which are also so prominent a thematic in Gonzo.

Thompson is able to represent direct comparisons between a recently retired Air Force Colonel, who, though extremely respected, does not possess the qualities which have come to typify his profession:

Joe Cotton is forty-seven, one of the last of the precomputer generation. By today’s standards, he wouldn’t even qualify for test-pilot training. He is not a college graduate, much less a master of advanced calculus with an honours degree in math or science. (Thompson, 1980: 435)

This man, unlike the younger generation of perfect specimens, however, is ‘an original, unfettered mind’ (Thompson, 1980: 435) and Thompson deliberately emphasises the chasm between Colonel Cotton’s mindset, and the ideologies of the young men who

have replaced him. Thompson-the-character asks the Colonel about the war in Vietnam, and about antiwar protests:

‘Well’, he said, ‘anytime you can get people emotionally disturbed about war, that’s good. I’ve been an Air Force pilot most of my life, but I’ve never thought I was put on earth to kill people. The most important thing in life is concern for one another. When we’ve lost that, we’ve lost the right to live. If more people in Germany had been concerned about what Hitler was doing, well ...’ He paused, half-aware – and only half-caring, it seemed – that he was no longer talking like a colonel just retired from the US Air Force. (Thompson, 1980: 436)

Here, emphasis is clearly placed on Cotton’s capacities for introspection and for compassion, as well as their distance from typical Air Force rhetoric.

These qualities stand in stark, direct contrast to the reply of a young test pilot from Virginia, formerly stationed in Vietnam, responding to a similar query from Thompson:

‘Well, I’ve changed my mind about the war’, he said. ‘I used to be all for it, but now I don’t give a damn. It’s no fun any more, now that we can’t go up north. You could see your targets up there, you could see what you hit. But hell, down south all you do is fly a pattern and drop a bunch of bombs through the clouds. There’s no sense of accomplishment’. He shrugged and sipped his drink, dismissing the war as a sort of pointless equation, an irrelevant problem no longer deserving of his talents. (Thompson, 1980: 436)

The closest Thompson’s narrative voice seems to get to explicitly expressing any disgust with this kind of emotionless, self-centred militarism, comes in the last sentence of the piece, in which Thompson asks, with discernable sarcasm: ‘Who would ever have thought, for instance, that the war in Vietnam could be solved by taking the fun out of bombing?’ (Thompson, 1980: 436) I would argue that there is, however, more going on here than simply contrasting the nostalgic image of an idiosyncratic military hero with the modern image of the perfect military specimen (healthy, sane, sober & conformist), even in the context of an implied message that the latter is better suited to mass-killing without self-reflection.

Both these articles, on wandering labourers and on the test pilots of Edwards Air Force Base, deal with what might be called the death of the American Dream, in the sense that they both can be seen to engage to some extent with the similarly nostalgic, ideologically-loaded sub-question, what have Americans become? As elsewhere in the Gonzo Text, this effort to assess both the practical state of the nation and aspects of the topography of its ideological landscape, is deeply entangled with the myth systems of organized politics, including prominent, politically divisive issues such as the Vietnam War.

Neutrality is Obsolete

The subjectivity of the political viewpoint of Gonzo goes well beyond the idea of conventional partisanism, and simply picking one of the two permissible, decidable sides, just as the difference between Joe Cotton and the young Virginian goes beyond a dichotomy of progressive versus conservative. Politics can neither be separated from the cultural contexts of ideological struggles, nor from the subjectivities of those who represent it in whatever form, including a form such as the Gonzo Text.

It is possible to discern extremes of both passionate approval and of fear & loathing within Gonzo's treatment of political matters, even though Thompson wrote about the degrading nature of politics, manifested and expressed, for example, through the depiction of the impact on one's lifestyle of being any kind of politics junkie:

After more than ten years of trying to deal with politics and politicians in a professional manner, I have finally come to the harsh understanding that there is no way at all – not even for a doctor of chemotherapy with total access to the whole spectrum of legal and illegal drugs, the physical constitution of a mule shark and a brain as rare and sharp and original as the Sloat diamond – to function as a political journalist without abandoning the whole concept of a decent breakfast. I have worked like twelve bastards for more than a decade to be able to

have it both ways, but the conflict is too basic and too deeply rooted in the nature of both politics and breakfast to ever be reconciled. (Thompson, 1980: 492)

The contrast between eating breakfast at a politician's home and on his schedule, rather than on a porch, ideally naked, with a multitude of drugs and alcohol accompanying the human ritual of a leisurely meal, as Thompson-the-character says he prefers (Thompson, 1980: 491), is only one depiction of this kind of apparent contempt for politics in general.

These ideas are emphasised by criticisms of contemporary politics which are repeatedly expressed within the Gonzo Text in terms of the conflict between behaving like a person rather than a professional, and of the lifestyle required by commitment to the political arena, as exemplified by the rigors of a Presidential campaign: 'There is not enough room on that hell-bound train for anybody who wants to relax and act human now and then. It is a gig for ambitious zealots and terminal action-junkies ...' (Thompson, 1980: 480) This conflict is perhaps in a state of tension with a more traditionally conformist conception of the state of the body politic as the incorruptibly democratic manifestation of some of the hallowed political aspects of the American Dream, though of course, the Gonzo treatment of politics is far more complex and interesting than a journalistic commentary composed of undifferentiated cynicism, or apathy.

The socio-cultural context of an increasingly tense and divided national political landscape cannot be disentangled from the character of Gonzo's subjectivity. As Stephenson notes, this link between form and function, tying the style of Gonzo to political as well as cultural divisions, is an essential part of reading the Gonzo method: 'Thompson's awareness of the fractures in America's national façade is evident not only in the content of his political writing, but also in the fragments, gaps and

associative leaps of his Gonzo prose' (Stephenson, 2012: 32-3). Stephenson further emphasises the cultural prominence of this aspect of approaching Thompson's Gonzo prose by pointing out that earlier scholars, approaching Gonzo primarily through the prism of Sixties counterculture, referred to much the same concept: 'The Gonzo style was the cracked mirror of a broken nation: "The jagged realism of the writing struck a nerve that was directly connected to the increasing fragmentation of American culture"' (Whitmer and Van Wyngarden, 2007: 83, cited in Stephenson, 2012: 33).

The point I am trying to make here, to be clear, is that some prominent readings of Gonzo tie the nature of the prose of the Gonzo Text to the nature of the political and cultural landscape of the Sixties in a very direct way. This aspect is emphasised, not unlike the 'drugs' aspect might be emphasised, to the point that it might be tempting to consider the concept as a possible 'key' for unlocking Gonzo. This idea should not be allowed overly to limit approaches to the relationship between Gonzo's style and content, though obviously links between that relationship and Gonzo's socio-cultural context(s) have a role to play in informing readings of the Text.

Thompson's narrative voice can be seen to illustrate and emphasise links between what would come to be called Gonzo and what might be called the political realities of these times. In one interesting example, taken from a piece on Nixon's inauguration in 1969, the narrative emphasizes such connections both explicitly, and through moving directly from political rumination to Gonzo-esque thematic effects. The observation that the objectivity of the press, in the context of social dissent, presupposes a vanishing sense of press membership as practical protection, can perhaps be viewed as a kind of practical evidence in support of Gonzo methods:

With press credentials, I usually manage to avoid arrest ... although I suspect that, too, will change in the new era. A press badge or even a notebook is coming to be

a liability in the increasingly polarized atmosphere of these civil conflicts. Neutrality is obsolete. The question now, even for a journalist, is 'Which side are you on?' In Chicago I was clubbed by police: In Washington I was menaced by demonstrators. (Thompson, 1980: 190)

The neutrality that Gonzo never adopted is depicted, in some practical senses, as no longer being an option for journalists covering such 'civil conflicts'.

This observation on the collapse of some aspects of journalistic neutrality is then emphasised by, or at least linked to, a digression in which Thompson-the-character uses a mixture of narrative & ruminative voices, as well as an ostensibly irrelevant cultural reference, in order to illuminate the subjectivity of his experience of the 'king-hell bumper' (Thompson, 1980: 190) of Nixon's inauguration:

The sight of Nixon taking the oath, the doomed and vicious tone of the protest, constant rain, rivers of mud, an army of rich swineherds jamming the hotel bars, old ladies with blue hair clogging the restaurants ... a horror-show, for sure. Very late one night, listening to the radio in my room I heard a song by The Byrds, with a refrain that went: *'Nobody knows ... what trouble they're in; Nobody thinks ... it might happen again'*. It echoed in my head all weekend, like a theme song for a bad movie ... the Nixon movie. (Thompson, 1980: 190)

As we have seen, these themes are inextricably entangled with these kinds of methodological and stylistic features in Gonzo. The political aspects of the problems of subjectivity are in play, and are linked with the more general, theoretical issues surrounding the interconnected ideas of journalism and activism, objectivity and subjectivity, representation and experience.

Politics, as a practical matter and as an ideological battleground, is linked to ideas of the conventional dichotomy of freedom versus oppression, and thus to concepts both of good/evil and of what might be translated into Gonzo terms as 'edgework/conformity', or perhaps 'edgework/boredom'. Gonzo subjectivity is in tension with mainstream ideas, in allowing the all but ineffably personal to intrude on ostensibly objective, rational, public ideas of politics, particularly in the context of opinion which invokes

moral judgement. That being said, this Gonzo undecidability enables the communication of ideas of politics which are situated within and expressed in terms of a wide range of social and cultural contexts.

In this section, and elsewhere in this work, I have discussed some approaches to Gonzo's depictions of politics, and I think it is possible to read much of the Gonzo Text as possessing some more or less overtly political content, in an activist or persuasive rather than a descriptive sense. I have tried to examine and illuminate some of the threads of meaning which link different aspects of Gonzo, including both matters of style, and themes such as politics, drugs and others, within the semiotic structures of the Text. Stephenson summarises some of the connections in this web of meanings in terms of Gonzo's operation as 'a form of resistance' (Stephenson, 2012: 17-8) to dominant structures of power and control:

Gonzo writing was born of spontaneous outrage, fuelled by chemicals and manifested in a decentred, broken-down prose of loose grammar and scattergun syntax, holed by ellipses and fractured by sudden jumps in perspective or subject matter. It allowed Thompson's quest for freedom to find expression not just in what he wrote, but in *how* he wrote it. He flouted the conventions of journalism and fiction and violated the rules of syntax in order not only to represent drugged consciousness, but also to subvert the premises of the state. (Stephenson, 2012: 17)

This can be read as emphasising Thompson – perhaps one should say Thompson-the-character, inasmuch as the reference might be said to be to a cultural figure's cultural existence – as perhaps the key sign, in some sense, within the Gonzo Text.

In this kind of approach, Thompson's persona, and the narrative voice which helps to evoke and support it, comprise the primary bearer of Gonzo's wider, cultural meaning:

Thompson's work implies that when the ground of the human subject is the sign, but one seeks to resist this state of affairs through authentic action, then a self-consciously dissident subject is more likely than ever before, at least in modern American culture, where the real, territorial frontier no longer exists, to end up practicing edgework, exploring borderlands of chemicals, sub-cultural living,

dissident politics, guns and motorized speed. Thompson's dangerous and excessive behavior therefore was not only idiosyncratic, with its roots in personal psychological issues, but also, and much more importantly, *culturally* significant ... (Stephenson, 2012: 94)

This is a valuable approach to consider in constructing a reading of Gonzo, particularly in the context of edgework and other types of extreme or otherwise problematic experience. It is also possible to consider that although Thompson's subjectivity in some senses represents the lens through which all aspects of the Gonzo Text are presented, that does not necessarily mean that the nature of the sign of Thompson-as-character should be allowed to adopt a possibly limiting position of semiotic primacy within a reading of the Text.

The Place of Definitions

The search for what Stephenson called authentic action is a complex, problematic theme within the Gonzo Text. Authenticity is one word for the quality of life-experience to which Thompson's works continually refer, sometimes in terms of freedom, fairness, human potential and/or, the subjective, undefinable 'edge'. 'The Edge' was a concern of Thompson's non-fiction before the birth of Gonzo, considered as a prominent (or at least interesting) feature of the subjective experience of contemporary American life. As we have seen, this idea of the edge is deployed again and again in discourses relating to politics, drugs, and various kinds of performance, but can be expressed in a sense at its simplest in terms of risking death in a test of one's skills, as here in *Hell's Angels*:

The only sounds are wind and a dull roar floating back from the mufflers. You watch the white line and try to lean with it ... howling through a turn to the right, then to the left and down the long hill to Pacifica ... letting off now, watching for cops, but only until the next dark stretch and another few seconds on the edge.... The Edge.... There is no honest way to explain it because the only people who really know where it is are the ones who have gone over. (Thompson, 1967: 282)

Motorcycles and drugs, like writing Gonzo journalism for a living and/or riding with the Hell's Angels, are pursuits which balance the need for skilled control in order to avoid disaster, against the thrill of pushing the envelope, internal and/or external, trying to find, and work, the edge.

This is not, however, about lifestyle choices as a matter of taste only, such as adrenaline-highs which not everyone enjoys: 'But the Edge is still Out there. Or maybe it's In. The association of motorcycles with LSD is no accident of publicity. They are both a means to an end, to the place of definitions' (Thompson, 1967: 282). This theme is linked, from its earliest sources within Thompson's works, to the pursuit of the aforementioned 'authenticity', and to the related practices of self-definition and self-actualisation. The edge, as an idea, forms part of an approach to theorising how life may be lived, in terms of understanding, classifying and depicting human experience, especially intense, undecidable experience.

The edge – objective risk and subjective reward, dangerous and unnecessary and thrilling, inside and/or outside the self and/or reason, perhaps 'realer' than 'real life' – is complex and undecidable. Like the American Dream, or the subjective experience of drugs (which, like the Edge, could be Out there, or maybe In), the problems and complexities of trying to explore the thematic of 'edgework' in journalistic prose form a prominent theme in Gonzo. While the webs of meanings entangled in the representation of this idea cannot be ignored, neither can they be separated from related semiotic systems within the Text. I hope I have succeeded in beginning to demonstrate that the edge, drugs, America, the Gonzo style, even the Thompson-as-character persona, can all be examined, in situ within the Gonzo Text, through broad, multi-stranded theoretical frameworks, able to incorporate approaches and ideas relating to different aspects of the

Text, from literary journalism and cultural politics to the psychology of dissent and the problematic of representing subjectivity. This is not because such a framework comprises the key to deciphering the Text's 'true' significance, but precisely because such an in a sense holistic approach allows disparate but interconnected features of the Text to be considered in terms of wider patterns of meaning.

One such larger semiotic structure which can be assembled in and for approaching a reading of Gonzo, is the concept of 'receptivity' which I have dealt with previously (see especially Chapter One), considered as a way of relating the basic problem of subjectivity to the inherent instabilities and inadequacies of concepts of closed, pure systems. This idea of 'receptivity' is grounded in a construction of interconnected meanings around the idea of 'drugs', and how the sign of 'drugs' can be situated in terms of perceptions of experience and theorisations of the self, the body and the state. I believe that this approach to some of the links between these ideas – all of which are prominent themes of Gonzo, within a range of disparate contexts, from drug-taking to politics, sport and the socio-cultural state of the nation – forms a valuable tool, not just for approaching aspects of the Gonzo Text, but also in terms of the representations of related themes and ideas in wider culture.

Theories of drug culture, are, in a meaningful sense, simply theories of culture. The problems and concerns to be dealt with are much the same in some senses and also, as discussed previously (see especially Chapter One), it is not possible to construct a sound theoretical distinction between what is and isn't touched or contaminated or affected by 'drugs'. In his recent book, *Hallucinations*, neurologist Oliver Sacks noted some of the numerous possible links between areas of the human cultural landscape and the experience(s) of the undecidable hinterlands between subjectivity and 'reality':

Hallucinations have always had an important place in our mental lives and in our culture. Indeed, one must wonder to what extent hallucinatory experiences have given rise to our art, folklore and even religion ... Did Lilliputian hallucinations (which are not uncommon) give rise to the elves, imps, leprechauns, and fairies in our folklore? ... Do 'ecstatic' seizures, such as Dostoevsky had, play a part in generating our sense of the divine? Do out-of-body experiences allow the feeling that one *can* be disembodied? Does the substancelessness of hallucinations encourage a belief in ghosts and spirits? Why has every culture known to us sought and found hallucinogenic drugs and used them, first and foremost, for sacramental purposes? (Sacks, 2012: xii)

It is perhaps worth underlining here the idea that 'drugs' is a site of structural instability in ideas of the subject and of experience, and that it might be possible to approach other Texts, in terms of these basic issues, through ideas informed by this 'receptivity' model for patterns formed by such theoretical instabilities.

That which would be called the unreal is a part of the subjective experience of reality. Drugs are an embodiment of this, and are also semiotically entangled with, amongst other things, issues of cultural politics and of theorising the relationship between individual freedom and social constraints. Gonzo, by performing the receptivity of the system of ideas of experience to the radically subjective, undecidably real experience of drugs, embodies the instability of these closed and rational systems of reality, journalism, America etc. In content, Gonzo emphasises the links in the parallel chains of meaning, from the experience of the 'drug-trip' itself, as subjective experience not unlike the experience of 'sobriety' in kind, through to the social and political applications of the idea that drug-users, like drugs, are not some kind of pollutant or poison, damaging to the civic body:

Now, with the coming of the drug culture, even the squarest of the neighbourhood old-timers say the streets are safer than they have been for years. Burglaries are still a problem but violence is increasingly rare. It is hard to find anyone outside the hippy community who will say that psychedelic drugs have made the neighbourhood a better place to live. But it's even harder to find a person who wouldn't rather step over a giggling freak on the sidewalk than worry about hoodlums with switchblades. The fact that the hippies and the squares have worked out such a peaceful coexistence seems to baffle the powers at city hall. (Thompson, 1980: 412)

The above is taken from a 1967 feature on the influx of hippies into the Haight-Ashbury district of San Francisco, and here already Thompson's journalistic representation of that community subverts conventional ideas of drug-users, while elsewhere in the same piece, some of the journalistic complexities of covering this beat are directly related to the legal/professional difficulties of reporting about 'drugs'.

Thompson's narrative voice relates the subject matter of counter-culture and alternative lifestyle to the same problems with (conventional) journalism's ability to provide effective, informative coverage. The journalist who wishes to cover the story is in a sense caught up in a paradox:

In normal circumstances, the mushrooming popularity of psychedelics would be a main factor in any article on hippies. But the vicious excesses of our drug laws make it impossible, or at least inhuman, to document the larger story. A journalist dealing with heads is caught in a strange dilemma. The only way to write honestly about the scene is to be part of it. If there is one quick truism about psychedelic drugs, it is that anybody who tries to write about them without firsthand experience is a fool and fraud. (Thompson, 1980: 415)

But to report such experience is criminal and impossible, as journalism. Thompson chooses to emphasise the loss of information and potential understanding here – that society can be seen as enforcing rules which deliberately create public ignorance on a significant issue, both culturally and in terms of public policy:

So, despite the fact that the whole journalism industry is full of unregenerate heads – just as many journalists were hard drinkers during Prohibition – it is not very likely that the frank, documented truth about the psychedelic underworld, for good or ill, will be illuminated at any time soon in the public prints. (Thompson, 1980: 415)

It might be possible to argue that from a certain perspective, Gonzo journalism was a solution to this problem, though of course, that wasn't all that Gonzo was for.

Drugs are always a part of Gonzo's web of meaning, and are of course a central idea in the construction of this concept of receptivity, but 'drugs' is not the only label of

exclusion of the undesirable (or undecidable) outside element, of whatever form, to be emphasized within Gonzo's evocation of these unstable purities, which themselves also take on a panoply of forms, across different levels of meaning within the Text. The theme of unenforceable, implicitly ridiculous attempts to rid systems of that-which-isn't-supposed-to-belong within them, can be presented without direct reference to drugs.

For example, writing in 1965 about unrest at Berkeley, Thompson considered the attempts by political elites to solve the problem of student dissidence by trying to keep the alleged source of the problem, non-student dissidents, off the campus:

One of the realities to come out of last semester's action is the new 'anti-outsider law', designed to keep 'nonstudents' off the campus in any hour of turmoil. It was sponsored by Assemblyman Don Mulford, a Republican from Oakland, who looks and talks quite a bit like the 'old' Richard Nixon. Mr Mulford is much concerned about 'subversive infiltration' on the Berkeley campus, which lies in his district. He thinks he knows that the outburst last fall was caused by New York Communists, beatnik perverts and other godless elements beyond his ken. The students themselves, he tells himself, would never have caused such a ruckus. (Thompson, 1980: 422)

On the level of the social, in the field of grass-roots political action, the 'outside element' may have possessed different features than the LSD molecule or even than the drug-related sign of 'the hippie', but the cultural, mythic pattern of meaning is much the same, on some levels.

It is possible to consider this example from Thompson's early literary journalism – written for *The Nation* in 1965 and included as Gonzo within *The Great Shark Hunt* – as mapping out, once again, another area of possible instability within the dominant myth-systems, represented here in the myth of the 'outside agitator'. In this piece, Thompson's narrative voice emphasises the futility of trying to close a system to undesirable elements, when the system is porous and the logic of its categories cannot

recognise the manifestations of ‘the outside’ which have been declared, but not properly defined, as undesirable:

The significance of the Mulford law lies not in what it says but in the darkness it sheds on the whole situation in Berkeley, especially on the role of nonstudents and outsiders. Who are these thugs? What manner of man would lurk on a campus for no reason but to twist student minds? As anyone who lives or works around an urban campus knows, vast numbers of students are already more radical than any red Mr Hoover could name. Beyond that, the nonstudents and outsiders California has legislated against are in the main ex-students, graduates, would-be transfers, and other young activist types who differ from radical students only in that they don’t carry university registration cards. On any urban campus the nonstudent is an old and dishonoured tradition ... A dynamic university in a modern population centre simply can’t be isolated from the realities, human or otherwise, that surround it. Mr Mulford would make an island of the Berkeley campus but, alas, there are too many guerrillas. (Thompson, 1980: 423)

I have quoted this at length, for relevance to the repeated, repeating pattern of receptivity which, I hope, can be usefully read into (and/or, out of) this polysemic Text. Though this web of meanings does not have direct recourse to the sign and symbol of ‘drugs’, the pattern of receptivity may be considered nonetheless to have been evoked and reiterated here, a socio-political variation on a theoretical theme.

Private, Human Time

Receptivity, like Gonzo, can be constructed in terms of interconnected webs of meaning, with reference to prominent signs, and larger semiotic systems – i.e. around drugs, subjective experience, politics, dissidence etc. – as we’ve seen, but also with reference to a wider range of culture. The Gonzo Text can be read in terms of transcending the contestation of ‘objectivity’, and ‘the truth’, by performing the instability of these concepts, rather than fighting over their proper application. Receptivity, as an idea or pattern of ideas discerned in this Text, represents an approach to finding/attacking instabilities in categories and structures of control, whether they are found in ideas of experience, journalism, the body or the state. As we have seen, this

concept also relates to the Gonzo pursuit of viable alternatives to these inadequate systems of meaning – whether that means dealing with student protest from a position of understanding that ideas can't be easily kept out by the boundaries of an urban campus, or dealing with journalism from a position of understanding that subjectivity can't be kept out of mimesis by the boundaries of a news publication. Drugs form a prominent focus of the radical utility of this type of approach, though only one thread of meaning among many.

While the Gonzo Text may be considered as aggressively anti-objectivity, both in form and content, this of course does not necessarily detract from the significance of the Text when considered from outside Hunter Thompson's awareness – the subjectivity in question. Subjective is not, in this case at least, the same as solipsistic. That Thompson-the-author theorises and performs a rejection of the use of 'objective reality', as a fundamental concept within his philosophy, does not mean that nothing matters. The gulf between subjective judgement and solipsism, or nihilism, should be noted, in case the Gonzo Text, stripped of a guarantee of truth, be judged as ultimately meaningless from a viewpoint which prioritises objectivity to the exclusion of other approaches to meaning and experience. The kind of approach to subjectivity represented in Gonzo may be considered, in these practical terms, as a matter of judgement, opinion, context, rather than the intrusion of unreality and the rendering of journalism as in a sense, abstract, without reference to reality (which is of course an unhelpful construction for the purposes of disentangling subjectivity within a Text).

In Gonzo, though there may not be a final, objective reality against and through which to read culture, there is a social and cultural environment to read subjectively, and to represent through the Text. America, Americans and the American Dream, are

presented subjectively in the Gonzo Text, and that overt subjectivity authorises the application of values, judgements, opinions, allowing the consideration of what *matters* in a sense to supersede the journalistic valorization of what *is*. Hence the kind of approach to journalism that concludes coverage of Nixon's inauguration, not with an ostensibly objective summary, but with Thompson-the-character's subjective experience of thinking about Nixon's inaugural balls:

I brooded on this for a while, then decided I would go over to the Hilton, later on, and punch somebody. Almost anybody would do ... but hopefully I could find a police chief from Nashville or some other mean geek. (Thompson, 1980: 194)

This is also the kind of journalism which embraces the presentation of positive judgement, up to and including the overt championing of a political candidate who, subjectively and personally, earns Thompson-the-author's passionate approval. This type of partisan subjectivity, campaigning *for* someone, recurs in the Gonzo Text, despite the theme of the general degradation and corruption of human beings in and by 'the world of politics'. Examples of such candidates include George McGovern (Thompson, 1983), Joe Edwards the Freak Power candidate for Mayor of Aspen (Thompson, 1980: 162-186), or Jimmy Carter (Thompson, 1980: 478-514).

Thompson's overt championing of Jimmy Carter, which started even before Carter formally declared his Presidential candidacy, linked Gonzo once again with an occasional, ostensibly exceptional but not necessarily unique burst of subjective enthusiasm for a 'mainstream' politician. Thompson made it clear that he was a very public ally of the Carter campaign, and discussed it with Pat Cadell, Carter's pollster and Thompson's 'old friend' (Thompson, 1980: 488), in that capacity:

That was *before* Pat went to work for Jimmy, but long after I'd been cited in about thirty-three dozen journals all over the country as one of Carter's earliest and most fervent supporters. Everywhere I went for at least the past year, from Los Angeles to Austin, Nashville, Washington, Boston, Chicago and Key West, I've been publicly hammered by friends and strangers alike for saying that I 'like Jimmy Carter'. I have been jeered by large crowds for saying this; I have been mocked in

print by liberal pundits and other Gucci people; I have been called a brain-damaged geek by some of my best and oldest friends ... (Thompson, 1980: 489)

By the 1976 campaign cycle, responses to Thompson's early endorsement of a relative unknown – though still a successful politician from well within the (mythical) spectrum of mainstream American political opinion – become in a sense a part of the story.

Subjectivity is important here in more than just the authorisation of such a radical departure from objective journalism's proscriptions against political bias. Thompson-the-author's radical subjectivity facilitates the use of personal experience to cut through, or at least to represent the idea of cutting through, the mythical (and geographical/practical) barriers that prevent citizens from 'really knowing' a public figure, on a personal, human level:

I liked Jimmy Carter the first time I met him, and in the two years that have passed since that Derby Day in Georgia I have come to know him a hell of a lot better than I knew George McGovern at this point in the 72 campaign, and I still like Jimmy Carter. He is one of the most intelligent politicians I've ever met, and also one of the strangest. (Thompson, 1980: 512)

While it may be impractical to apply on any large scale, Thompson may be seen to assert that the best way to judge a politician is to get to know them personally, preferably well away from the harsh lights of an active campaign, subjectively, through personal interaction without reference to the media.

Rather than direct references to political theory, or to the practical realities of the political landscape of the campaign, it is to this largely unreported personal experience that Thompson's narrative voice refers, in support of his endorsement of Jimmy Carter for President. Thompson explicitly asserts that it is this experience which qualifies him to make these subjective judgements about Carter, and emphasises that this 'human' interaction is not the typically sanitised and limited interaction between a politician and a journalist:

I have known Carter for more than two years and I have spent more private, human time with him than any other journalist on the 76 campaign trail. The first time I met him – at about eight o'clock on a Saturday morning in 1974 at the back door of the governor's mansion in Atlanta – I was about two degrees on the safe side of berserk, raving and babbling at Carter and his whole bemused family about some hostile bastard wearing a Georgia State Police uniform who had tried to prevent me from coming through the gate at the foot of the long, tree-shaded driveway leading up to the mansion. (Thompson, 1980: 490)

From the outset Thompson makes it clear that he wasn't there covering Carter when he formed his opinion, and, it is also made clear in the article, Carter wasn't performing for the press when Thompson encountered him, either. It is perhaps interesting to note possible semiotic links between such a construction of how political opinion should be formed, and the relationships between personal experience and public or civic life evoked and examined elsewhere in the Gonzo Text.

The political partisanship of Gonzo journalism can be seen, again and again, as linked in a variety of different ways to other aspects of Gonzo, through subjectivity to style, to edgework, to the undecidability of drugs. I have examined Thompson's representations of Carter here for the purpose of illuminating further the ways in which these ideas are entangled within the Gonzo Text. That this coverage may have been read as propaganda, in a sense, intended to persuade people to be more likely to support the candidate, is not as interesting for the present purposes of this enquiry as are the ways in which Thompson-the-character, considered in the Text, can be seen to relate different kinds of subjective choices. Thompson's agency as a subjective judge of politics, and as a journalist, may be considered as demonstrating links between this kind of subversion of dominant ideas and other types of dissidence, from edgework and drug-taking to the profane interrogation of sacred American ideologies, such as the American Dream.

What Used to be Called the American Dream

The American Dream is a difficult idea to pin down, but it is not necessary to define it objectively in order to consider its place in the Gonzo Text, both because such a definition is impossible, and also because the Gonzo Text itself does not attempt the task of providing any kind of concrete definition. The American Dream in Gonzo is an imaginary standard, an undefined but still broken promise of what the nation is in some sense supposed to be, whether it is invoked as an elusive quest-object in Las Vegas or in depicting the elitist realities of the 1976 Presidential election cycle:

This time, on the 200th anniversary of what used to be called the American Dream, we are going to have our noses rubbed, day after day – on the tube and in the headlines – in this mess we have made for ourselves. (Thompson, 1980: 481)

Though Thompson's beat may be read as the death of the American Dream, it is perhaps possible to consider the construction of the mythic American Dream within the Gonzo Text, not as an organizing thematic, but nonetheless as a significant nexus of meanings within the interplay of the Text. The American Dream is a complexly polysemic sign in the Gonzo Text; referred to explicitly, or implicitly evoked in the self-referential depiction and subjective judgement of America, it is a theme, myth, topic, ideology, in many ways itself as undecidable as the pharmakon.

The American Dream in this sense is all but coextensive with the semiotic field of the myth(s) of America itself, though the Gonzo Text's construction of ideas of America under the rubric of the American Dream remains a significant theme in Gonzo. The American Dream is in a sense subverted as a sign by its consideration and deployment in the context of the myth's failures, paradoxes and inconsistencies when compared to the subjectively represented state of the nation. The subjective and still essentially mythical 'death of the American Dream', whether or not it is explicitly referenced,

becomes a potent web of meanings around this subjective, critical approach to the cultural landscape of America, throughout the Gonzo Text. A reading of this aspect of the Text is connected, in some sense, to the same chains of analogous semiotic relationships to which the construction of receptivity refers, in that the space between the American Dream and the Gonzo construction of its death might be considered in terms of the performance of subjectivity.

To borrow a mathematical analogy, one aspect of the difference between the concepts of subjectivity and of objectivity could be considered as like the difference between a variable and a constant. In terms of the practice of journalism, the ideas of objectivity and the attendant concepts of fairness, balance, professionalism, factuality etc. imply that, in theory, the same 'story', fed through the objective journalist, should produce functionally uniform output. Subjective journalism performs the multiplicity of possible stories, based on different choices of interpretation, representation, in a sense even of experience itself, in that objective stimulus is not assumed to determine subjective experience, and also in that placing an emphasis on subjective experience rather than the 'relevant facts' is itself a choice. I mean this in the sense of variability more than in the sense of agency; though the latter application is just as valid, it is not necessarily as directly relevant to the point that I'm trying to make.

In terms of political journalism, as an example of a prominent concern of the Gonzo Text, this conception of subjectivity could be thought of in terms of the rejection of the standards of factual journalism, as well as of the stringent standards regarding bias/opinion specifically attached to the coverage of partisan politics. The subjectivity of the Gonzo Text can be read as in a sense going further. Talking about the radical character of the subjectivity of Gonzo's narrative voice, blending 'fact' and 'fiction',

and even ‘miscellaneous’, into the undecidable fabric of the Gonzo Text, it is important to remember the idea of Gonzo as *pharmakon*. It isn’t a matter of whether or not Gonzo is journalism, or whether or not it is good journalism. Gonzo isn’t just subjectivity rather than objectivity, opinion rather than fact; it represents a choice that isn’t on the list of options, a performance of the inadequacy of the categories in question. This pattern of meaning – these hidden variables with undecidable implications – is, of course, another construction of the idea I’ve been calling receptivity, which, as I hope I’ve demonstrated, may form part of approaches to the Gonzo style, to the political activism and ideological excesses of its content, to the ways in which its treatment of ‘drugs’ and ‘drug experiences’ destabilises conventional ideas, and to other aspects of the Text, including the American Dream.

The American Dream is a complicated, interesting myth, and Hunter Thompson wrote about it directly, wrote about other things in terms of its meanings, and was to some extent associated with it as a concept, to the point that he was often asked to comment on his ideas of its death. As with Gonzo journalism itself, another idea with which the Hunter Thompson persona is closely associated, there was not only never an objective definition of this subjective idea, there was never even a clear, subjective definition of it. As Thompson commented, when asked about the concept in one of the interviews collected in *Ancient Gonzo Wisdom*, depicting the American Dream is a far cry from defining it: ‘I’ve been through this before as you can tell from reading this stuff. And I never have figured some of the most basic things out – like what is Gonzo journalism and what is the American Dream’ (Perra, 2001, cited in Thompson, 2009: 284). The American Dream may perhaps be considered, however, as undefinable in the general case only. Within the tapestry of interrelated meanings composing/surrounding the Gonzo Text, as we have seen, specific manifestations are depicted, theorised, contested.

Considering the American Dream in terms of the construction of receptivity is problematic, in that it is a different kind of system. Ideas of capitalist opportunity and meritocracy do not uncomplicatedly contain the same kind of purified, conceptual, interior space as some of the other ideas to which I've been applying this theory, however, there are parallels. Considered in terms of the implied promise of the American Dream, that an American who does what they are supposed to do will earn admittance to the wealth and happiness which are mythically available to any hard-working citizen, the system of meanings in play here can be seen as directly related to ideas of receptivity. The Gonzo Text constructs and depicts the American Dream in ways which can be read as emphasising the instabilities of the myth in its manifestation as a kind of sorting gate – dividing out those who are worthy of living the Dream from those who are not. As with other, more straightforward aspects of receptivity within the Text, the boundaries of these categories of judgement are shown to be unstable and insupportable, even in terms of the internal logic of the relevant myths. Tramp diggers who live the rugged individualism of the American Dream descend into obsolescence and poverty, in a kind of inverted demonstration of receptivity – in which that which nominally does belong is excluded, as opposed to the pattern of meaning we have mostly been dealing with, relating to the undecidability of the nominally rejected elements. At the same time the selfish swine and greedy hustlers who are presented as so corrupt and vile are seen to profit, and to be embraced by the American Dream.

Thompson-the-author commented on the American Dream's subjectivity, in addition to his own failure/refusal to try to define it, pointing out that as a prominent American myth it is constantly reinvented and redeployed, in disparate cultural spaces. He does

not claim *the* American Dream, but he does sometimes hint at an intriguing, personal appropriation of the myth within his own ideas, when asked to define the Dream itself:

Jesus Christ ... well I identified it as a junk nightclub that burned down. And there's more to that than just flip. I've considered that a lot. I've felt that in some ways I've lived the American Dream. Let's just leave it at that because it's different for everybody. And as I say, I feel it sometimes. Yeah, each could possibly – aw never mind that's too arcane. (Perra, 2001, cited in Thompson, 2009: 284)

This subjective construction is interesting, and the idea that Gonzo itself can be read as representing the American Dream, perhaps in terms of Thompson-the-character's legendary, mythical Gonzo lifestyle, recurs, even if only in interviews and commentary:

Salon.com: But in a way, haven't you lived the American Dream?

HST: Goddamnit! [pause] I haven't thought about it that way. I suppose you could say that in a certain way I have. (Glassie, 2003, cited in Thompson, 2009: 321)

Leaving aside the odd but not particularly obviously relevant point that somewhere in the years separating these interviews Thompson seems to have forgotten his own ideas, the deployments in play here, of the myths of the Gonzo lifestyle and of the American Dream, are deceptively complex and arguably highly significant.

The Gonzo Text's representations of the Gonzo lifestyle are complexly interrelated with the undecidable natures of drugs and of edgework, which may themselves be read as representative of receptivity in action, in the sense that they are choices whose undecidability destabilises the limits of possible, acceptable options within a given system. The face in the mirror at the Kentucky Derby, of the same character that fails to find the American Dream in Vegas, and is disgusted by the dream's corruptions in the civic as well as the cultural life of the nation, is still admissible to the hallowed mythical space of 'living the American Dream'. This complex mythical operation is implicit in the Gonzo Text's demonstration of the political and philosophical utility of undermining the cultural structures surrounding the policing of the imagined edges not

just of journalism, or even of experience, but of the ideologies, ideas and categories which support conventional conceptions of American culture and society. Just as a drug experience manifests the receptivity of experience to that which dominant logics of power and control wish to exclude, so the Gonzo Text 'on the death of the American Dream' performs a limited, personal, subjective American dream of its own. Living with the freedom to write/produce such a Text as 'the life and work of Hunter S. Thompson' in the first place, can itself perhaps be seen to represent an exuberant, excessive celebration and affirmation of the possibilities of life in America. Some myths of the American Dream may be dead, but, seen with the right kind of eyes, the Gonzo American Dream rises from the ashes.

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