

“The Right Kind of Eyes”:
Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas as a
 Novel of Journalistic Development

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Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas describes a bildungs process in which its protagonist finds his place in relation to the dominant social order of mainstream journalism.

“No, but we don’t have to join them.”
 —Bob Dylan

Like the Horatio Alger novels it frequently invokes, Hunter S. Thompson’s *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* roughly describes a *bildungs* process—a process of development—in which its protagonist¹ finds his place in relation to the dominant social order, albeit as someone who finds his place because he is ultimately confident of his authority to stand *outside* of that order. The “dominant social order” in this case is mainstream journalism, and the process through which the protagonist finds his place in relation to it involves the articulation of a vision critical of the ethos of journalistic professionalism and the alienating effects of what Robert A. Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao have called the “regime of objectivity”² that sustains it. This critique, I’d like to argue, is developed at least in part, through the motif of “vision.”

From acid-induced hallucinations of screeching attack bats in the California desert and cannibal lizards in the lobby of the Mint Hotel, to the newspaper account of the young son of “a prominent Massachusetts Republican” who “pulled out his eyes while suffering the effects of a drug overdose in a jail cell,”³ and the inexplicably mutating array of sunglasses—Spanish,⁴ Brazilian,⁵ Danish,⁶ and Saigon-mirror⁷—worn by the book’s protagonists to shield their eyes from the brutal neon excess of Las Vegas but also the omnipresent scrutiny of the “eyes of the law,”⁸ the fear of which drives the narrative on its frenzied, paranoid course, one doesn’t have to look far to find references to vision in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. None, however, has received the widespread attention of the “wave” speech which is the book’s thematic heart. Set between the harrowing comic scene of the protagonist’s mock electrocution of his stoned Samoan attorney and his own decision to “flee” Las Vegas and a hotel bill “running somewhere between \$29 and \$36 per hour, for forty-eight consecutive hours,”⁹ Thompson’s elegy to the San Francisco acid culture of the mid-1960s and the confidence it inspired among those who were “there and alive in that corner of time and the world,”¹⁰ offers a lucid flashback of a unique moment of surging idealism and hope:

There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was *right*, that we were winning . . .

And that, I think, was the handle—that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn’t need that. Our energy would simply *prevail*. There was no point in fighting—on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave . . .

So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost *see* the high-water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back.¹¹

Thompson’s memorable image extends the metaphorical phrase “the Great San Francisco Acid Wave”¹² which he deploys earlier in the chapter, animating it into a vision of apocalyptic grandeur which, in its historical sweep, stands in contrast to the “hired bullshit” which, in the same passage, he says makes the past so “hard to know.”¹³ What remains to be answered, however, is the question of the precise nature of “the right kind of eyes” that allow such a comprehensive vision of a historical moment and its aftermath. As the reference to “hired bullshit” suggests, it is probably not the perspective provided by conventional historiography; nor would it seem from the scathing representation of mainstream journalism in the text, to be anything produced by those who pound out history’s first draft.

For a representation of what we might call the *wrong* kind of eyes, we need look no further than the most obvious agent of a traditional journalistic way of seeing in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, the photographer Lacerda. Although he is assigned with Thompson to cover the Mint 400 off-road race (the subject of the first of the two parts which comprise the book), we never actually see Lacerda. But then, we never really see the race either: with the dust kicked up from the hundreds of motorcycles and dune buggies screaming around the desert course, Thompson says “covering” the Mint 400 was “like trying to keep track of a swimming meet in an Olympic-sized pool filled with talcum powder instead of water.”¹⁴ Lacerda, however, we are told, is undaunted, aiming all the photographic hardware he can muster into the churning cloud of grit, in some abiding faith that the truth would thus somehow reveal itself to his lens. Thompson writes, “Lacerda insisted on Total Coverage. He wanted to go back out in the dust storm and keep trying for some rare combination of film and lens that might penetrate that awful stuff.”¹⁵ In this passage, we see traces of photography’s—and ultimately journalism’s—common root in what Sarah Kember has described as “a scientific system of thought fashioned in Enlightenment philosophy and by Cartesian dualism.”¹⁶ In its impenetrability, the dust cloud, for example, offers a fitting image of the resistance nature poses to the positivist assumption of the “unproblematic existence of an observable external reality” willing to reveal its secrets to the inquiries of “a neutral and unified observing subject,”¹⁷ embodied here by Lacerda; in the photographer’s curious absence from the text, moreover, we have a correlative for the deleterious effects of such objectivity on the subjectivity of the observer. Lacerda’s efforts to “penetrate” the dust cloud also suggest the desire, articulated in the writings of Francis Bacon, for scientific modes of enquiry to force nature (typically represented as feminine), by violence if necessary, to give up its secrets before the superior rational and technical resources of the (male) inductive enquirer.¹⁸

The description also recalls, however, the important role which photography and photoengraving played in the rise of contemporary journalistic form, particularly journalism’s emphasis on objectivity. In the apparent neutrality of the photographic image, reporters and editors of the mid-nineteenth century saw a dramatic illustration of the representational neutrality then being promoted as a corrective to the excesses of the partisan press.¹⁹ As Dan Schiller points out, photographic mimesis became the paradigm not only for news objectivity but also a criteria for its historical counterpart—journalistic professionalism. This link between what he calls the mid-nineteenth century’s common conception of the newspaper as a sort of daguerreotype of the world and the typification of the professional journalist as a neutral recording device, is evident in a passage he quotes from Isaac Pray, dated 1855:

A reporter should be as *a mere machine to repeat*, in spite of editorial suggestion or dictation. He should know no master but his duty, and that is to give the exact truth. His profession is a superior one, and no love of place or popularity should swerve him from giving the truth in its integrity. If he departs from this course, he inflicts an injury on himself, on his profession, and on the journal which employs him.²⁰

Journalistic truth, in other words, is a function of the reporter's ability to reproduce the world with mechanical accuracy; the model of this objective fidelity, which is the basis of journalistic professionalism, is the camera.

But if photography offered journalism the comforting vision of a world of independently existing truths readily available to the reporter's professional eye and pen, that reassurance came at a profound cost. As Kember notes, realist photography, informed as it is by Enlightenment philosophy and Cartesian dualism, "splits and privileges the mind over the body, the rational over the irrational, culture over nature, the subject over the object and so on along an infinite chain which continues to structure Western epistemology."²¹ All of these oppositions are operative in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*: we have, for example, the irrationality inspired by wanton drug use contrasted with the ever-present rationality of "the eyes of the law"²² whose gaze the protagonist feels constantly upon him; there is also the corrupt and artificial urban nightmare of Las Vegas and its other—the respite offered by Woody Creek, the "quiet place"²³ where Thompson lives, and the mention of which sets the tone for the chapter in which the wave speech appears.

It is, however, in the separation of mind and body that the dualism associated with photography leaves its most conspicuous imprint on the text. Early in the book, for example, the protagonist discovers a line in his notes that he has no recollection of ever having written: "KILL THE BODY AND THE HEAD WILL DIE."²⁴ The words are suggestive, and Thompson attempts various political and cultural explanations for their mysterious presence in his notebook. Regardless of the glosses he puts on it, though, it is clear that the precondition for this seemingly shocked statement of the obvious is precisely the sort of Cartesian separation of mind and body Kember describes. That separation is dramatically demonstrated a bit later in the text in Thompson's description of the effects of ether on the recreational user:

This is the main advantage of ether: it makes you behave like the village drunkard in some early Irish novel . . . total loss of all basic motor skills: blurred vision, no balance, numb tongue—severance of all connection between the body and the brain. Which is interesting, because the brain continues to function more or less normally . . . you can actually *watch* yourself behaving in this terrible way, but you can't control it.²⁵

In its capacity to provide the observing subject with an apparently objective view of the world, ether is the anesthetic equivalent of conventional journalism's prevailing way of seeing. The fact that that objective view, moreover, should render the observing subject a helpless spectator of his own biomechanical buffoonery strongly suggests something of the alienating effects of that particular positivistic mode of engaging with the world. This fact is underscored throughout the passage by the protagonist's use of the second person singular to describe his own actions:

You approach the turnstiles leading into the Circus-Circus, and *you* know that when *you* get there, *you* have to give the man two dollars or he won't let *you* inside . . . but when *you* get there, everything goes wrong . . .²⁶

This same alienation is evident in the fact that the protagonist spends much of the book operating under a name other than his own. Given the relationship among journalistic professionalism, objectivity, and subjectivity, the circumstances under which Thompson introduces the alias "Raoul Duke" into the text are noteworthy. He first mentions the name while in the throes of a drug-related panic in the lobby of the Mint Hotel. More significantly, however, he does so while registering not only as a hotel guest, but also as a member of the press. With its protagonist thus self-identified, however ambivalently, as a reporter, the first part of *Fear and Loathing* focuses on Thompson's experience covering the race; throughout these chapters, he displays what seems to be an ironic identification with the journalistic professionalism of those other members of the press gathered for the event. In the third paragraph of the book, for example, he proclaims, "I was, after all, a professional journalist; so I had an obligation to *cover the story*, for good or ill."²⁷ This identification is reinforced several dozen pages later when, after watching another professional, "the correspondent from *Life*," lose his "grip on the bar" and sink "slowly to his knees," Thompson uses the first person plural to declare, "We were, after all, the absolute cream of the national sporting press."²⁸ Such statements *sound* ironic, but the fact is that, for the first part of the book, Thompson is lumped with the professional press.²⁹ Although he considers different ways he might participate in the race³⁰ and thus fulfill the his earlier stated desire to produce a piece of "pure Gonzo journalism,"³¹ the impossibility of getting his hands on the Vincent Black Shadow he says he'd need to do so properly as well as the .38 revolver and "ugly" attitude of the person manning the race registration desk,³² reduce him to the status of observer and thus, despite all of the excesses of the first part of the book, to the alienated subject position of the conventional professional journalist.

This identification with mainstream journalism becomes cringe-makingly clear in the register into which Thompson slips when describing the start of the race: “. . . and the first ten bikes blasted off on the stroke of nine. It was extremely exciting and we all went outside to watch.”³³ “*Extremely exciting*”? Along with again using “we” to link Thompson with the “*Life* man” and the other professional journalists on the scene and repeating the text’s important theme of “watching,” this sentence also mimics the “calm, cultivated, and, in fact, genteel voice”³⁴ Tom Wolfe had identified in his introduction to *The New Journalism* with non fiction writing prior to the early 1960s. While perhaps once appropriate for “a radio announcer at a tennis match,”³⁵ it is a tone which has little to do with the sort of balls-out mayhem of the Mint 400, nor with anyone as “simpatico” with the crowd it attracts as is Thompson.³⁶ In channeling what Wolfe called the “pale beige tone”³⁷ of that voice, Thompson demonstrates, first, his identification—facetious as it may be—with the mainstream press at this point of the book, and, second, the total lack of rhetorical consistency of that voice with his own, which he has already clearly established in the preceding pages.

John C. Hartsock has noted that literary journalism arose specifically in reaction to the alienating effects of “modern journalistic style” on its practitioners, as well as on the subjects of their accounts and their readers.³⁸ Such a movement from an alienated to a more integrated sensibility is evident in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in the change which occurs between the time Thompson gets his press accreditation for the Mint 400 and when he takes up the second assignment in the book, covering the National Conference of District Attorney’s four-day conference “on narcotics and dangerous drugs.”³⁹ Despite the parallels between the second half of the book and the first, Thompson doesn’t register for the conference as a reporter—as his attorney notes, they function in this part of the book more like “infiltrators”⁴⁰ or spies, a fact signaled by the name tag Thompson wears for the conference, identifying him as “a ‘private investigator’ from L.A.”⁴¹ 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. “It was going to be quite a different thing from the Mint 400,” Thompson writes. “That had been an *observer* gig, but this one would need *participation*.”⁴²

The story, he says, would call for “a very special stance,” not only because its subjects would be probably more hostile to such “stone-obvious drug abusers”⁴³ as he and his attorney than were the crowd at the Mint 400 but also because his method of covering the story would require him to clarify his relationship as a writer with the protocols of journalistic professionalism. In

registering *as a journalist* for the Mint 400, Thompson—regardless of his alias—is compelled to identify, however minimally, with the alienated subject position of the others in that group. As such, whatever misgivings he may have about that group, can only be expressed in the muted, ironic terms we have seen. Given his uncertain relationship with journalistic professionalism in the first part of the book, he would be implicated in any unequivocal invective he might level against the members of his own tribe.

When, however, he registers not as a journalist but as a “private investigator”—a label, he notes, “which was true, in a sense”⁴⁴—any ambiguity which had marked his relationship with conventional journalism vanishes: he is now squarely outside of the boundaries of mainstream journalistic practice. This position, however, is a tonic for his previously indeterminate “professional” identity, restoring to him a more authentic, less alienated sense of self. “Considering the circumstances,” he writes, “I felt totally meshed with my karma.”⁴⁵

The clarity of this outlaw position, moreover, frees him from the dissembling language which had characterized his relationship with journalism in the first part of the book. He’s not even *pretending* to be a member of the press any more, and that new relationship frees him to launch an all-out verbal assault against journalistic professionalism:

Journalism is not a profession or a trade. It is a cheap catch-all for fuckoffs and misfits—a false doorway to the backside of life, a filthy, piss-ridden little hole nailed off by the building inspector, but just deep enough for a wino to curl up from the sidewalk and masturbate like a chimp in a zoo-cage.⁴⁶

With this scorching passage, Thompson loudly declares his independence from the guiding ethos of mainstream journalism; the fact that in the next two paragraphs he removes the conference badge identifying him as “Raoul Duke” confirms the reintegration of his previously divided identity.

But what *exactly* is responsible for this apparent restoration of the protagonist to a more authentic self? A possible answer is to be found in a recurrence of the camera metaphor in a passage from the jacket copy for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in which Thompson recalls his original plans for the book:

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. The writing would be selective & necessarily interpretive—but once the image was written, the words would be final; in the same way that a Cartier-Bresson photograph is always (he says) the full-frame negative. No alterations in the darkroom, no cutting or cropping, no spotting . . . no editing.⁴⁷

In writing the book, however, it seems as if Thompson must have had some intuition of the very conservative consequences of adopting such a traditionally conceived photographic metaphor for his work. That intuition is suggested in criticism Thompson levels at Wolfe in the same jacket copy.

In his reference to the apparent immediacy of the unedited photographic moment, Thompson repeats Wolfe's well-known account of the technique he used in his landmark story on California custom car culture of the mid-1960s, "The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamlined Baby."⁴⁸ Wolfe says he wanted to write the story to challenge the insipid, cliché-ridden stories he called "totem" journalism, a common type of feature characterized by what Walt Harrington has aptly described as "a kind of feel-goodism aimed at reinforcing the most common beliefs of readers."⁴⁹ Wolfe, however, was having trouble with his material and so, in his words, he "just started recording it all" in a memo to his editor at *Esquire* Byron Dobell who, after "striking out the 'Dear Byron' at the top of the memorandum" ran the story as it was.⁵⁰

Like Wolfe, Thompson planned in his Las Vegas story to "record the whole thing, *as it happened*."⁵¹ Somewhere along the way, however, he seems to have recognized the limitations of this method and, more importantly, to have realized that, as innovative as it might seem to be to turn one's self into a version of the "mere machine to repeat" Pray had extolled, doing so marked a ratcheting up rather than a breaking away from dominant journalistic practice.⁵²

Thompson suggests this point later in the jacket copy when he explicitly places Wolfe on the journalistic side of the literary-journalism ledger. "The only thing new and unusual about Wolfe's journalism," writes Thompson, "is that he's an abnormally *good* reporter."⁵³ The "fine sense of echo"⁵⁴ with which Thompson credits Wolfe is no small gift, of course, but it is hardly a defining feature of the sort of engaged and radically subjective literary artistry with which Thompson associates "The New Journalism" and for which he seems to be striving. Describing *Fear and Loathing* as "a first, gimped effort in a direction that what Tom Wolfe calls 'The New Journalism' has been flirting with for almost a decade,"⁵⁵ Thompson proceeds in the jacket copy to identify Wolfe's main shortcoming *as* a new journalist: "Wolfe's problem is that he's too crusty to *participate* in his stories," Thompson writes. "The people he feels comfortable with are dull as stale dogshit, and the people who seem to fascinate him as a writer are so weird that they make him nervous."⁵⁶ Thompson's response to the distance at which Wolfe (and others) hold their subjects is to diminish it by aggressively entering the narrative frame: where Wolfe was made nervous by his subjects and so remains largely detached from them, Thompson interacts with those about whom he's writing—often in

ways which “jangle” them “right down to the core of their spleens.”⁵⁷ In doing so, he eases away from the detachment implied in the “recording” model of reporting he had originally envisioned for the Las Vegas story and thus from the vestiges of the journalistic professionalism that paradigm preserves, and towards the more subjective and radically participatory form of writing he calls Gonzo:⁵⁸

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. Probably the closest analogy to the ideal would be a film director/producer who writes his own scripts, does his own camera work and somehow manages to film himself in action, as the protagonist or at least a main character.⁵⁹

Although Thompson retains a filmic metaphor to describe Gonzo, unlike his earlier conception of the journalist “functioning as a camera,”⁶⁰ the writer in this model doesn’t just compose in the viewfinder, he enters it, working both sides of the lens, “writing” both the representation *and* its original. Such an intervention complicates the clear distinction between subjective consciousness and objective reality the positivist model of representation seeks to maintain. It also reminds us, however, of the manner in which the two are imbricated: in influencing the objective scene and its players, Thompson makes explicit, albeit in exaggerated fashion, the subjective inflection of phenomenal experience which necessarily occurs, it would seem, in all but the most mechanical acts of representation.⁶¹

The extreme subjectivity we find in Thompson’s work defines one pole of the literary journalistic response to what Hartsock calls the “epistemological crisis” provoked by “the rise of a factual or objective journalism style.”⁶² (The other is a more “outward-directed” or “covert subjectivity” which we might associate with Wolfe’s style.) As Hartsock notes, such extreme subjectivity is always at risk of falling into solipsism.⁶³ Objectivity, however, bears its own risks for the subject, and these are accentuated by the camera. One particular risk is evident in the work of an American author Thompson is known to have read and emulated: John Dos Passos. In his *U.S.A.* trilogy, published in 1938, John Dos Passos intersperses the realistic narratives of his twelve main characters with twenty-seven biographies of actual individuals contemporary with the time of the novels, sixty-five “Newsreel” sections, comprised, as Juan Suárez has said, of “collages of found texts, including snatches of songs, journalistic prose, political speeches, headlines, and ticker-tape news releases,”⁶⁴ and fifty-one sections entitled “The Camera Eye.” Contrary to the common association of photography with objective vision, these sections are highly

subjective, providing, it has been argued, “extremely allusive autobiographical sketches whose full intelligibility often depends on an intimate knowledge of Dos Passos’s biography.”⁶⁵

Michael North has commented explicitly on the matter of these “enigmatic”⁶⁶ sections of *U.S.A.* in his book *Camera Works*. Noting an interview with Dos Passos in which the author remarks that the “Camera Eye” sections were “a safety valve” for his “own subjective feelings,”⁶⁷ North observes that such a connection of the camera with subjectivity is unusual:

[I]t has been more common, from Fox Talbot right down to Roland Barthes, to consider the camera as essentially objective rather than subjective. At the time when *U.S.A.* was published, of course, cameras inevitably suggested documentary realism of the kind made so famous by Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange. In literature, particularly in American literature, the camera is associated more usually with this kind of realism than with the sort of impressionistic interior monologues that constitute the “Camera Eye” sections of *U.S.A.*⁶⁸

North argues, however, that the detachment which is essential to documentary realism has the effect of stranding the viewing subject in his or her own subjectivity:

The objectivity of the camera eye becomes a kind of subjectivity, not because it is slanted or distorted but because it is isolated and detached. And this seems very close to what Dos Passos has in mind in associating his camera eye with a subjective point of view: that there is something structurally isolating in eyesight itself, something that the camera exaggerates by separating the other senses from the visual, physical presence from the act of seeing, and one moment in time from every other.⁶⁹

The “Camera Eye” sections of *U.S.A.*, in other words, foreground the profoundly alienating effects on the observer of the strictly positivist conception of photography on which contemporary notions of journalistic professionalism are based.

Douglas Brinkley, who edited Thompson’s letters, notes that the author seems to have read Dos Passos in 1956,⁷⁰ and that he was among the writers whose style Thompson “studiously” mimicked in his early years.⁷¹ As such, Daniel Grubb sees a “direct echo” of the “Camera Eye” sections in *Fear and Loathing*.⁷² Although Grubb doesn’t fully work out the details of the relationship, he does make the important point that Dos Passos’s example allowed Thompson to incorporate the subjectivity of the text’s writer-narrator-protagonist into the story.⁷³

While the precise nature of the relationship between the “Camera Eye” sections of *U.S.A.* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* remains uncertain, it

can be said that Dos Passos's association of photography with subjective isolation provides a clue to the nature of the "right kind of eyes" Thompson describes in the wave speech. In compressing five or six years of history into a single image that fuses Thompson's personal experiences with those of a generation, the passage represents an aesthetic consolidation consistent with the spirit Thompson attributes to San Francisco in the mid-1960s. Particularly important is the sense of community he describes among those who were there then and the remarkable assurance they felt that, regardless of where you went in the Bay Area, you would "come to a place where people were just as high and wild" as you⁷⁴ and whose energy, like yours, was fueling the "long fine flash" of that unique historical moment.⁷⁵ That ethos, of course, was inseparable from the drug responsible for it all, LSD, and its capacity to induce in its users a sense of the sort of inter-subjective understanding Wolfe describes in *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*. In this regard, the "right kind of eyes," the "wave speech" suggests, are those capable of seeing beyond the isolating effects imposed by Enlightenment paradigms and their embodiment in photography and the various regimes such as objective journalism that take their cue from its example. If ether is the drug Thompson uses to represent the alienating effects of conventional journalism on its practitioners, acid, a drug that Thompson's contemporary Thomas Pynchon said allows its users to feel "themselves integrated into everything, like mystics in deep trances,"⁷⁶ represents the possibility of resisting those effects. Gonzo is the discursive counterpart of acid and its revolutionary culture.

In abandoning a photographic model of reporting that excludes the subject from the picture, Thompson, with Gonzo journalism, seeks to recover something of the acid-inspired spirit of integration which had characterized San Francisco in the mid-1960s and, in so doing, to challenge the fragmentation which had followed "The Movement's"⁷⁷ collapse. "We are all wired into a *survival* trip now," writes Thompson, lamenting not only the decline of the community of which he had been a part but also the dissipation of its energies and with them, the "fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was *right*, that we were winning. . . ."⁷⁸

Gonzo is, in some respects, an atavistic embodiment of the spirit that drove the acid culture;⁷⁹ but it is a mutation too, the edge in Thompson's style deriving from his inability to accept the naive "mystic" fallacies of the Acid Culture⁸⁰ and a resolve never to lose sight of the "grim meat-hook realities"⁸¹ of temporal political life. Politically alert as it may be, though, Gonzo also represents a rearguard action, an effort to not allow to be vanquished a once-powerful force now rapidly in retreat. As Thompson remarks in the audio commentary track to the Criterion DVD of Terry Gilliam's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*:

All the politics, really, in this world, in the American century, has been a rearguard action. You're never going to win, but, yeah, you can slow it down. Like Dylan said to me when I said I don't know if we can beat these bastards. Same old story. He said, "No, but we don't have to join them." And I thought, "A-ha: Now that's the real voice of the sixties there."⁸²

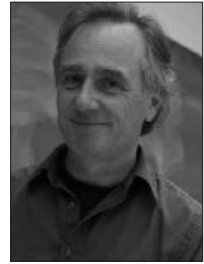
In his experience working as both a journalist and a literary writer, Thompson seems to have had some intuition of the very conservative consequences of adopting a traditional, objective camera-eye metaphor as a model for his own work. In allowing him to inject himself into the frame of his stories, however, Gonzo provided Thompson with a means of representing and thus of *reflecting on* himself, his journalistic practice, and his art. In the case of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, this reflection takes the form of a compressed literary autobiography, a "fantasy"⁸³ perhaps in its details but not in the accuracy of the developmental arc it describes. In its two-part structure, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* charts a movement away from the objective, camera-eye model and its entrenched relationship with journalistic objectivity and professionalism, towards a more integrated and less alienated literary-journalistic practice consistent with the spirit of the San Francisco acid culture.

It is in this sense that *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* could be read as sharing some features with the *bildungsroman* or novel of development. Traditionally, the *bildungsroman* deals with the process by which its protagonist is integrated more or less successfully into the dominant social order. The rags-to-riches Horatio Alger novels to which Thompson frequently refers in *Fear and Loathing* describe such a process for their nineteenth-century American protagonists.

But what if to be successfully integrated into the dominant social order one must, as is suggested by the objective camera-eye model of journalistic professionalism, cancel or repress one's subjectivity? Professional success in such cases would necessarily involve a certain alienation and disintegration of the self. A *failure* to integrate with the status quo, on the other hand, would mark the successful integration of the self or, at least, the maintenance of some version of non-alienated subjectivity. This idea is latent in Thompson's own description of *Fear and Loathing* as "a failure," although a failure "so complex," he says, "that I feel I can take the risk of defending it as a first, gimped effort in a direction that what Tom Wolfe calls "The New Journalism" has been flirting with for almost a decade."⁸⁴ The text narrates a failure to fulfill its initial conception, but given that that conception was based on a flawed photographic paradigm of journalistic representation to which the author discovers an alternative, the book, in fact, succeeds, although it does so as a work of a new genre.

Just as generations of boys were encouraged to read the *Ragged Dick* stories of Horatio Alger Jr. for guidance in their own growth, Thompson offers *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as an alternative model to which “new” journalists may look for their own “professional” development. If *Fear and Loathing* is a *bildungsroman*, it is thus one in which the goal of an individual’s development is (in Dylan’s words) to *not* “join them.” As the creator of such an alternative vision, and the writer of a book still capable of jangling the sensibilities of its readers, of disturbing the still-prevalent nineteenth-century paradigms of mainstream journalistic practice, and of stirring up the metaphors sedimented within them, Thompson may well be, as he states in the final sentence of the book, “a monster reincarnation of Horatio Alger.”⁸⁵

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NOTES

1. Throughout this essay, I refer to the protagonist of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as “Thompson.” The name “Raoul Duke” under which he spends much of the book is an alias he adopts at some point prior to registering at the Mint Hotel. That Duke is the assumed name for Thompson is suggested by the telegram the protagonist receives addressed to “HUNTER S. THOMPSON c/o RAOUL DUKE” in Part One, Chapter Ten. Care must be taken, however, not to associate *that* “Hunter S. Thompson” too closely with the author who elsewhere (if he is to be believed!) describes *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as, variously, a “happy work of fiction” but also a work “caught & finally crippled in that vain, academic limbo between ‘journalism’ and ‘fiction.’” Generically, *Fear and Loathing’s* fictional dimension trumps its journalistic elements. As such, I have taken the liberty of identifying the book in

the title of this paper as a novel. See Hunter S. Thompson, "Jacket Copy for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*," in *The Great Shark Hunt: Strange Tales From a Strange Time*. Simon and Schuster paperback edition. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2003), 105–11.

2. Robert A. Hackett and Yuezhi Zhao, *Sustaining Democracy? Journalism and the Politics of Objectivity*. (Toronto: Garamond Press, 1998), 6–9.

3. Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*. 2nd Vintage Books Edition. (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 101–02.

4. *Ibid.*, 3.

5. *Ibid.*, 24.

6. *Ibid.*, 32.

7. *Ibid.*, 72.

8. *Ibid.*, 85.

9. *Ibid.*, 69.

10. *Ibid.*, 67.

11. *Ibid.*, 68.

12. *Ibid.*, 63.

13. *Ibid.*, 67.

14. *Ibid.*, 38.

15. *Ibid.*, 40.

16. Sarah Kember, "'The Shadow of the Object': Photography and Realism," *Textual Practice* 10(1) (1996), 151.

17. *Ibid.*, 153.

18. *Ibid.*, 151.

19. For more on the relationship between journalistic professionalism and objectivity, see Robert McChesney, *The Problem of the Media: U.S. Communication Politics in the 21st Century*. (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 57–97.

20. Isaac Clark Pray, *Memoirs of James Gordon Bennett and His Times*. (New York: Stringer and Townsend, 1855), 472, quoted in Dan Schiller, *Objectivity and the News: The Public and the Rise of Commercial Journalism*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981), 89.

21. Kember, "Photography and Realism," 151.

22. Thompson, *Las Vegas*, 85.

23. *Ibid.*, 63.

24. *Ibid.*, 23.

25. *Ibid.*, 45.

26. *Ibid.*, emphasis added. It is hard not to consider the possibility, as well, that Thompson's reference to ether in this passage alludes to T. S. Eliot's famous reference in the opening lines of "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock" to "the evening . . . spread out against the sky / Like a patient etherized upon a table." Eliot may not be talking about a craps table, but the effect Thompson describes could be classed as an example of the sort of "dissociation of sensibility" Eliot wrote about in his essay "The Metaphysical Poets" to describe the integration of thought and feeling

or experience which he found in the poetry preceding the seventeenth century. In this regard, it is worth noting that the term “dissociation of sensibility” was in fact coined prior to Eliot’s use of it by early experimenters who imagined “the possibility of inducing controlled, reversible anesthesia” (Richard Barnett, Review of Stephanie Snow, *Operations without Pain: The Practice and Science of Anaesthesia in Victorian Britain in Medical History* 51(2): 256-57). To this we might add that Eliot’s first wife was addicted to ether.

27. Thompson, *Las Vegas*, 4.

28. *Ibid.*, 37.

29. A similar identification with the professional press occurs while Thompson, out on the race course in a press vehicle, comes across “two dune-buggies full” of rowdy military types:

“What *outfit* you fellas with?” one of them shouted. The engines were roaring; we could barely hear each other.

“The sporting press,” I yelled. “We’re friendlies—hired geeks” (39).

The word “hired” here resonates with the “hired bullshit” Thompson will later say makes history so “hard to know” (67), confirming mainstream journalism’s compromised relationship with truth. In this regard, Thompson’s writing represents an attempt to work outside of the mutually reinforcing constraints of journalistic convention and journalistic professionalism.

30. Thompson, *Las Vegas*, 33.

31. *Ibid.*, 12.

32. *Ibid.*, 33.

33. *Ibid.*, 37.

34. Tom Wolfe, in Wolfe and E. W. Johnson, eds., *The New Journalism: With an Introduction* (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), 17.

35. *Ibid.*

36. Thompson, *Las Vegas*, 109. Thompson remarks: “At the Mint 400 we were dealing with an essentially simpatico crowd, and if our behavior was gross and outrageous . . . well, it was only a matter of degree.”

37. Wolfe, *The New Journalism: With an Introduction*, 17.

38. John C. Hartsock, *A History of American Literary Journalism: The Emergence of a Modern Narrative Form* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 42.

39. Thompson, *Las Vegas*, 77.

40. *Ibid.*, 141.

41. *Ibid.* When Thompson later removes the badge, he reports that it identifies him as “Raoul Duke, Special Investigator, Los Angeles” (201).

42. *Ibid.*, 109.

43. *Ibid.*

44. *Ibid.*, 141.

45. *Ibid.*, 110.

46. *Ibid.*, 200. Like much in Thompson, this passage is not without its own ironies and ambiguities. For all of its vitriol, for example, the tirade is prompted by a fake news story, worthy in its surreal scene (it is datelined “*Aboard the U.S.S.*”).

Crazy Horse: Somewhere in the Pacific (Sept. 25)" characters (including "Dr. Bloor, the ship's chaplain" and "a hooded officer known only as 'The Commander.'"), and events it describes ("five crewmen including the Captain were diced up like pineapple meat in a brawl"), of the imagination of Thompson's contemporary, the novelist Thomas Pynchon. "Why bother with newspapers, if this is all they offer?" asks Thompson, before launching into his journalist-as-"masturbating chimp" screed. Here we could venture, however, that Thompson, at this late point in his narrative, has traded irony for hyperbole as the trope most appropriate for his protagonist's new relationship with journalistic professionalism. Given that hyperbole is the opposite of the sort of "understatement" Wolfe identified with the "pale beige tone" that had prevailed among "journalists and literati ten years ago" (17), the choice is a rhetorically shrewd one, indicating that, so confident is his character in his new position, that he has no difficulty pulling out all the stops. It is also worth noting that this new attitude is signaled in Thompson's final description of his protagonist as a man "just sick enough to be totally confident" (204).

47. Thompson, *Great Shark Hunt*, 106.

48. Originally published in *Esquire* as "There Goes (Varoom! Varoom!) That Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby (Rahghhh!)," this article would provide the title for Wolfe's book *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamlined Baby*, a work which, along with Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood*, made 1965 a landmark year in the history of American literary journalism. See Hartsock, *History*, 195.

49. Walt Harrington, *Intimate Journalism: The Art and Craft of Reporting Everyday Life* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1997), xv.

50. Tom Wolfe, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1965), xii-xiii.

51. Thompson, *Great Shark Hunt*, 106.

52. It is also possible that *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is Thompson's response to Wolfe's "Las Vegas (What?) Las Vegas (Can't Hear You! Too noisy!) Las Vegas!!!!," the first story in *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*. Although Thompson is critical of Wolfe in the jacket copy for *Fear and Loathing*, those comments need to be considered in the context of the "strongly positive," but ultimately unpublished, review he says he wrote of the book for the *National Observer*. For more, see William McKeen, "Interview with Hunter S. Thompson," in *Conversations with Hunter S. Thompson*, eds. Beef Torrey and Kevin Simonson (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 93.

53. Thompson, *Great Shark Hunt*, 108.

54. *Ibid.*

55. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*

57. Thompson, *Las Vegas*, 18.

58. Thompson's "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved," published in *Scanlan's* in June 1970, is the story most generally cited as the first example of

a fully blown “Gonzo” journalism. According to Marc Weingarten, “it mapped out the blueprint for all of Thompson’s subsequent work of the decade.” See Marc Weingarten, *The Gang That Wouldn’t Write Straight* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2005), 235.

59. Thompson, *Great Shark Hunt*, 106.

60. Ibid.

61. In his next book, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72*, Thompson identifies the camera explicitly with objectivity, although it is a mechanical objectivity unavailable to the human subject. Noting that his own objectivity “swore up and busted about ten years ago,” Thompson remarks that, “The only thing I ever saw that came close to Objective Journalism was a closed-circuit TV setup that watched shoplifters in the General Store at Woody Creek, Colorado. I always admired the machine, but I noticed that nobody paid much attention to it.” Effective as a means of surveillance and for reporting “things like box scores, race results and stock market tabulations,” such objective recording of raw data is admirable but not possible, he suggests, in the more complex interactions of journalists and their subjects. “[T]here is no such thing as Objective Journalism,” Thompson writes in the same passage. “The phrase itself is a pompous contradiction in terms.” See Hunter S. Thompson, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail ’72* (New York: Warner Books, 1973), 47–48.

62. Hartsock, *History*, 51.

63. Ibid., 52

64. Juan A. Suárez. “John Dos Passos’s *USA* and Left Documentary Film in the 1930s: The Cultural Politics of ‘Newsreel’ and ‘The Camera Eye,’” *American Studies in Scandinavia* 31 (1999): 43.

65. Ibid.

66. Michael North, *Camera Works: Photography and the Twentieth-Century Word* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 145.

67. Ibid.

68. North, *Camera Works*, 145–46.

69. Ibid., 146.

70. Douglas Brinkley, ed., *The Proud Highway: Saga of a Desperate Southern Gentleman, The Fear and Loathing Letters, Vol. 1.*, by Hunter S. Thompson (New York: Random House, 1997), 27

71. Ibid., xxiii

72. Daniel Grubb, “The Rhetoric and Role of Hunter S. Thompson” (M.A. thesis, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, 2006), 23.

73. Ibid., 22–24.

74. Thompson, *Las Vegas*, 67.

75. Ibid.

76. Thomas Pynchon, Letter to Thomas M. Hirsch, January 8, 1969. qtd. in David Seed. *The Fictional Labyrinths of Thomas Pynchon*. (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1988), 242

77. Thompson, *Las Vegas*, 180.

78. *Ibid.*, 68

79. Thompson actually refers in the jacket copy to *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as “a sort of Atavistic Endeavor, a dream-trip into the past—however recent—that was only half successful.” See *Great Shark Hunt*, 109.

80. Thompson, *Las Vegas*, 179.

81. *Ibid.* 178.

82. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, DVD, directed by Terry Gilliam (1998; The Criterion Collection, 2003).

83. Thompson, *Great Shark Hunt*, 107.

84. *Ibid.*, 104.

85. Thompson, *Las Vegas*, 204.