



Image of René Fredensborg by Robin Skjoldborg

# The Passive-Responsive Journalist: An Offensive Case of Immersion in the Danish Film Industry

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**Abstract:** This study examines a controversial piece of magazine journalism on cliquish culture in the Danish film industry, “Frygt og lede i Avedøre og omegn” [Fear and loathing in and around Avedøre] by René Fredensborg, which was featured in the Danish film magazine *Ekko* in 2011. The study identifies stylistic features that emerge as the reporter mixes playful Gonzo poses with injured personal testimony, ultimately blaming social forces or immersion as such for the consequences of his coverage. A personal narrative based on immersion would seem a promising way of exploring social dynamics in a small, Nordic, high-trust society such as Denmark’s, especially in the domain of arts and culture, in which the roles and interests of journalists and cultural actors tend to overlap. Fredensborg’s approach on this occasion, however, displays several pitfalls in the enactment of the dedicated, responsive style of engagement associated with literary journalism. Drawing on the trope of getting carried away, Fredensborg’s story showcases a peculiar, passive form of responsiveness that serves to renounce professional and personal responsibility.

**Keywords:** immersion – trust – rhetorical style – Gonzo journalism – cultural journalism – Denmark

Along with the other Nordic countries, Denmark is categorized as a high-trust society in which corruption is rare, and citizens generally have a high level of confidence in each other and in public institutions.<sup>1</sup> While the benefits of such a culture of trust are in many respects invaluable, that culture poses its own challenges to journalists at work, including journalists who cover arts and culture. In her extensive work on the nature of this beat, Kristensen offers the following characterization:

[A]rtists, cultural producers and journalists . . . often mingle in the same circles through friendship-like relations or close collegial collaborations, and cultural journalists often share their sources' aims, interests and passions for art and culture rather than playing the traditional adversary role . . . Such a situation is especially pronounced in a geographical context like the Danish with a small-scale cultural scene and press . . .<sup>2</sup>

While a culture of trust—and even of bonding—might be seen as a spontaneous or generalized form of immersion beneficial to literary journalism practice in the area, it clearly constrains and potentially compromises journalistic credibility and agency.

To investigate dilemmas that invariably arise when reporting is based on close interaction with sources, the present case study looks to a controversial magazine story about the Danish film industry that provides an interesting terrain to reflect on the ethos or perceived credibility of the immersed and invested literary journalist. Giving special attention to rhetorical style and presentation of self at the textual level helps answer questions such as: How are *readers* invited to make sense of a reporter's ambivalent role of both insider and outsider? What specific stylistic features are at work to make them like and trust (or not) the journalist who mingles and reports?

The study focuses on the reporter and writer René Fredensborg (b. 1972), who in 2011 challenged the abovementioned friendly context as well as his readers' ethical sensibilities by moving through the social and professional circles of the Danish film industry in the role of aspiring film producer and later deciding to report on the experience as a literary journalist. Fredensborg's case is somewhat extreme but an all the more illustrative enactment of the generalized ethos of literary journalists that, as Kristensen argues, is not only shared with cultural journalists in important ways but is also currently gaining momentum and mainstream status.<sup>3</sup> While this ethos tends to be romanticized as that of journalists working with passion and integrity,<sup>4</sup> Fredensborg's approach draws attention to particular ways of evoking and subverting such expectations, turning virtues into pretensions and, for better or worse, offending because of them.

Fredensborg foregrounds what Wilson refers to as the second order nar-

rative in immersion journalism, “that is, a coexisting literary story about *how* the text we’re reading ostensibly came to be researched and written,” at the expense of first order, ethnographic coverage. In this respect, the story fits Wilson’s notion of contemporary “*postethnographic*” immersion journalism if partly despite itself.<sup>5</sup> Fredensborg’s failure to blend in as part of the film community explicitly becomes the main point of the story while, however, his ensuing claim to an outsider status never becomes persuasive either.

Peculiar to Fredensborg’s immersion narrative is what will be presented here as a “passive-responsive” stance that frames the journalist as a victim of circumstance and serves to relieve him of professional and personal responsibility for the story of which he is part. To this end, the reading of Fredensborg’s work herein will draw specifically on a rhetorical notion of *responsiveness* to capture what is arguably a cardinal virtue of literary journalists that invites emulation as well as more dubious distortions. That is to say, literary journalism is conceived as a *situated art of response*, associated with its practitioners’ openness to learn from and be affected by social experience, as well as a more questionable inclination to become caught up in, or even carried away by, social experience. Literary journalists ultimately perform this balancing act at the textual level to win the goodwill of a specific readership, so this is where the ethos of literary journalism in specific settings—such as the arts and culture sector in contemporary Denmark—takes form and can be scrutinized more closely.

### Fredensborg’s Persona in a Danish Context

René Fredensborg is an exponent of what Moestrup refers to as *personadriven* cultural journalism.<sup>6</sup> Since graduating from the Danish School of Journalism in 2001, Fredensborg has covered mainly arts and culture as a newspaper reporter, a television satire host, a longform magazine writer, a music and film reviewer, and a columnist/blogger in national print media.<sup>7</sup> Quite consistently, Fredensborg has transgressed the formats he has worked with, establishing an image of being invested and (sometimes overly) passionate, or putting himself on the line, as the popular phrase has it.

For example, Fredensborg was temporarily suspended from his job at the free national newspaper *Nyhedsavisen* after covering riots in the streets of Copenhagen in 2007. Under the title “Mit (sølle) liv som activist” (My [miserable] life as an activist), he reported as a participant observer on the side of rioters in violent confrontations with the police over the clearance and condemnation of Ungdomshuset (The Youth House), that had served for decades as an autonomous countercultural community space.<sup>8</sup> The article prefigures many of the features of the present study’s key subject, “Frygt og lede

i Avedøre og omegn” (Fear and loathing in and around Avedøre), published in the quarterly *Ekko* film magazine in 2011.<sup>9</sup> In both pieces, Fredensborg appears determined to prove his readiness to be part of a group of people he is immersed in and goes far in terms of letting social pressure determine his actions. In his 2007 activist story, he states this quite explicitly: “I am simply getting carried away by the atmosphere. Especially when somebody [a rioter] places a cobblestone in my hand and asks me to throw it [at the police].”<sup>10</sup> Not surprisingly, this passage offended readers and colleagues, who criticized Fredensborg’s participant observation as unprofessional, militant, and illegal.<sup>11</sup>

What might be more surprising, considering the formal suspension of Fredensborg, is the way a chief editor at *Nyhedsavisen*, Simon Andersen, defended Fredensborg’s coverage of the riots. In a long blog post that amounts to an inventory of the classic distinguishing features of literary journalism, Andersen characterized Fredensborg’s reporting as “norm breaking, trendsetting, and unique,” “stylish,” “empathic,” “unforgettable,” and “in a class by itself.”<sup>12</sup> He expresses hope that Fredensborg’s methods inspire colleagues and recognizes Fredensborg as engaged and able to “get inside the minds of the activists.”<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Andersen’s response celebrates Fredensborg’s work at the explicit expense of mainstream journalism as practiced at the largest national daily, the center-right-leaning *Jyllands-Posten*. Its work Andersen describes as comparatively “neat” and squeamish (with reporters in cover behind police lines), “tedious,” “ridden with banalities and clichés,” prejudiced, and uncovering nothing.<sup>14</sup> Apart from the polemical tone in the latter quoted passages, it is fair to say that the earlier portrayal sketches a professional ethos that literary journalists would generally identify with or aspire to. On this occasion, it is evoked not just to pave the way for Fredensborg’s return to his job but also serves to brand and promote *Nyhedsavisen*, which had been launched just a year earlier. The newspaper was delivered to households in the largest Danish cities and made available at train stations and other public spaces, including upper secondary schools, deliberately counting and targeting a young audience as part of its wide national readership. The relatively large and young staff worked independently of news agencies with the declared intention to challenge conventional notions of news content by giving equal priority to lifestyle/human interest, science, and political stories.<sup>15</sup>

In terms of shaping Fredensborg’s own professional persona and later career, the peculiar combination of being celebrated while suspended transgresses the paradigm of literary journalism and points to the ethos of Gonzo journalism and the “first person major showman” style of Hunter S. Thompson (1937–2005).<sup>16</sup> In Thompson’s case, Mosser writes, the radically objec-

tive, participatory, and flamboyant style became a way for him to “differentiate himself from other New Journalists of the same era—Wolfe, Mailer, Didion.”<sup>17</sup> To this day, differentiation remains important to the Gonzo ethos, even if its components have turned into a paradigm that also tempts clichés.<sup>18</sup> The writer and immersive reporter Matthew Thompson has been called “Australia’s answer to Hunter S. Thompson” for reasons that apply to Fredensborg in Denmark—if Thompson’s political orientation is exchanged with cultural orientation in the following list of shared features presented by Kremmer:

[O]bserved commonalities [between Thompson and Thompson] include literary techniques such as immersion, quests, an outsider perspective, satire, idealism, literary-political stunts, humor, drug tropes, and critiques of journalistic practice and political leaders.<sup>19</sup>

The most obvious example of such work on Fredensborg’s part is his debut novel *Høsehunde* [Bird Dogs: Novel] (in 2011, i.e., the same year as the *Ekko* story that sported the signature Thompson title prefix “Fear and Loathing . . .”). *Høsehunde* is a satirical first-person narrative and road trip of a reporter looking for an interview with Bon Jovi during the band’s (actual) visit to Denmark in 2008.<sup>20</sup> A pastiche of Hunter Thompson’s 1971 Gonzo classic *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*,<sup>21</sup> Fredensborg’s novel was recognized as a roman à clef about the Danish music industry, music journalism included.

While performative and playful in the style of Thompson, Fredensborg’s work has followed a more general, international turn toward confessional and emotionalist journalism too.<sup>22</sup> In a 2008 study, Isager argues that Danish Gonzo journalism has taken on a peculiar confessional and autobiographical flavor,<sup>23</sup> and the transformed genre’s ambivalent toggling between irony and sincerity seems to have been reinforced in Fredensborg’s work as an arts and culture beat reporter. Notably, 2011 was also the year when a new national radio station, Radio24syv, added Fredensborg to its list of high-profile hosts. Famously, the station attracted, promoted, and made the most of various profiles that had been prominent voices in other cultural, political, and media contexts.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, much criticism was directed at the station during its existence from 2011 to 2019 for being a notorious hotbed for a cliquish cultural elite, as portrayed by Kristensen.<sup>25</sup> This popular image of 24syv put Fredensborg’s dual role of cultural-elite insider and autonomous Gonzo-like outsider to the test in his presentation of self. The test continues,<sup>26</sup> but it was prefigured spectacularly in the *Ekko* story that made one trait obvious: in terms of the insider/outsider balancing act, Fredensborg shares Thompson’s philosophy that, despite bonding—or getting drunk or high—with sources, everything that happens to him may potentially be reported. Thompson writes:

As far as I was concerned [when covering the U.S. presidential campaign in 1972], 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. When professional antagonists become after-hours drinking buddies, they are not likely to turn each other in . . . especially not for “minor infractions” of rules that neither side takes seriously; and on the rare occasions when minor infractions suddenly become major, there is panic on both ends.<sup>27</sup>

In “Frygt og lede i Avedøre og omegn” [Fear and loathing in and around Avedøre], René Fredensborg decides to betray exactly such an “after-hours drinking buddy” from the film community. Technically, the story is a third-order narrative, as it covers Fredensborg’s experiences behind the scenes when producing a documentary that covers, in turn, Fredensborg’s experiences behind the scenes of the Danish employment system as a job seeker. Offended by what he experienced firsthand as unhealthy camaraderie in the film and TV business, he eventually decided to write about the process of planning and applying for public funding for his documentary. In the wake of the story’s publication, a public film consultant lost his job, and Fredensborg received strong reactions from prominent cultural actors in the film industry, who called him “en klam lille lort” (a disgusting little nobody [shit]) who “betrays people’s trust by drawing a Gonzo-like caricature to get his 15 minutes of fame.”<sup>28</sup> Fredensborg is referred to as hypocritical, “miffed like a schoolgirl,” an attention-seeking, deficient version of German social documentarist and activist Günter Wallraff or the U.S. documentarist Michael Moore, who adopts a transparent “contrived naïveté.”<sup>29</sup> This reception reflects the aforementioned and unresolved tension between sincerity and irony, with its references to the serious, indignant pose of a miffed schoolgirl and Wallraff on the one hand, and the more playful “contrived naïveté” associated with a documentarist of a more satirical bent—Moore—on the other.

Roughly a decade later, when the story briefly reappeared in the Danish news, Fredensborg responded to this criticism, calling it unfairly personal. Notably, he highlighted the exposé component of his own story as if style and performance of professional ethos were irrelevant:

My article was an attempt to open a debate about cliquishness in the film industry, after which [Frank Piasecki Poulsen] as a friend of the fired film consultant threatened me with what I could only interpret as a beating . . . It was the messenger, I, who seemed to be the problem—not the way the duties of the office [of film consultant] were performed.<sup>30</sup>

Surely, however, matters of ethos and style are all-important. The serious and injured tone of this comment is also apparent in the magazine story itself, where it coexists with Gonzo features that pull in an opposite, playful direction. The ambivalence is worth investigating to uncover the ethical compromises that are made and displayed at the textual level.

### **Ethos and Style of Engagement**

The term style is used here in an extended sense inspired by Nicotra's practice-oriented use of the phrase "style of engagement."<sup>31</sup> Nicotra refers not to literary journalism practices but to rhetorical critics' reading practices when introducing responsiveness as a form of agency: a practice driven by fascination and characterized by a readiness to be affected and transformed by a given textual encounter. This way of approaching a text resembles an immersive approach to reporting. As a responsive reader, Nicotra says, one spends a prolonged time with the text, approaching it "not entirely innocently but also not yet knowing what such an encounter might produce."<sup>32</sup> She develops her argument by comparing such responsiveness with a readiness to be seduced, an approach that makes it necessary to "actively . . . open the self to alterity, whether that alterity be a text, a communication situation, or something else."<sup>33</sup> In this perspective, literary journalism may be viewed as a rhetorical discipline defined as ready exposure and response to the particulars of a given situation.

Indeed, with immersion as an established key component of literary journalism, such readiness for long-term, potentially transformative exposure to particulars seems integral to its ethos.<sup>34</sup> When Hermann describes "ethnographically informed accounts from the margins," she highlights the recognizable "time-consuming research and carefully crafted narratives" of "not the urgent and immediate but the quotidian."<sup>35</sup> Moreover, interestingly, she points to a temporal tipping point or reorientation in these stories, "a changed set of attitudes and beliefs borne out of prolonged immersive experiences."<sup>36</sup> The "prolonged reporting time," says Hermann, "helps journalists reevaluate and abandon their expectations in favor of locally situated perspectives."<sup>37</sup> It is this capacity for reorientation (Hermann) or subjective transformation (Nicotra) that arguably counts as a hallmark of literary journalism ethos and which René Fredensborg tentatively invokes.

As noted earlier, Kristensen's work shows how cultural journalists distinguish themselves by being immersed or otherwise closely intertwined with sources by default,<sup>38</sup> which requires extra caution when they venture—as Fredensborg did—to share their personal experiences and expose certain groups. In a sidebar titled "Undercover, or Just Drawing on Past Experience?" in



his handbook *Immersion*, Conover has a pragmatic take on such situations. When his students decide to write a story based on their immersion somewhere, basically turning their memoirs into a kind of undercover reporting, Conover advises that they explicitly anonymize sources who might unwittingly find themselves included in a story, so they “won’t feel ambushed.”<sup>39</sup> Next, he advises the students to return to those sources to reveal their professional intention and do additional reporting.<sup>40</sup> Fredensborg did neither, so his sources probably would have felt ambushed, his readers might have turned against him because of that, and that could have been the end of the analysis. One could simply tell Fredensborg to follow Conover’s advice next time:

Remember that the reader of your work . . . becomes complicit in your deception. So in advance, if possible, pause now and then to consider: How will this make me look? Like an empath? Or like an asshole?<sup>41</sup>

Still, Fredensborg’s decision to write his story against what would generally be considered sound professional advice generated useful material in terms of studying how a literary journalist works in practice to legitimize his approach. How does Fredensborg work in his writing to gain the attention and trust of first, publishers and editors, and second, readers?

Of Kramer’s oft-quoted eight “breakable rules for literary journalists,” the fourth relates style to the reporter’s presentation of self through the notion of voice: “*Literary journalists write in ‘intimate voice,’ informal, frank, human, and ironic.*”<sup>42</sup> The qualities of “frank, human, and ironic” seem to anticipate the ambiguity at play in Fredensborg’s writing. On one hand, the literary journalist is perceived as a straightforward and honest person who strives, in Jim Boylan’s words, for “fidelity to the truth as the writer [him- or herself] sees it.”<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, the literary journalist is perceived as ironic, that is to say, playful, and somewhat guarded, disclaiming or relativizing the aforementioned subjective truth.

These two conflicting qualities of style sometimes present themselves in sequence according to a narrative logic—a particular version of Hermann’s reorientation principle—where irony gradually gives way to gravity. The reporter pursues an idea for a story and is initially excited and amused by it, but then faces challenges along the way that complicate the engagement. On a large scale, such a dynamic may be recognized in Norah Vincent’s book-length story of the year she disguised herself as a man, immersing herself in male communities with an excitement that ethical concerns gradually cancel. Her actions eventually damage her mental health, which invites a follow-up story of immersion in mental institutions.<sup>44</sup> Rather than being responsive to their sources, journalists become vulnerable in a literal, hurting sense, and

while dedication is difficult not to respect, the peculiar logic of literary journalists being too dedicated for their own good offers more of a paradox in terms of ethical appeal. An admirable professional trait becomes a human weakness and might still be appreciated as such, but when and to what extent does it serve as an excuse for unprofessional behavior?

Fredensborg's style of engagement evokes the image of an excited reporter under the influence of cultural and social forces and—sometimes—drugs.<sup>45</sup> He portrays himself as ready to play along, exposing himself unconditionally to input and impulses from the film community. Rather than deploying more value-laden terms such as excitement, passion, commitment, or dedication, the focus herein is on the notion and textual enactment of *responsiveness*. The term is meant to echo the previously mentioned rhetorical conception of literary journalism as a situated art of response that harbors the admirable quality of openness to learning and being affected on the one hand, as well as more questionable degrees of getting caught up or carried away on the other.

### Fredensborg's Responsive Style: Actively Passive

Genre clues in the editorial framing of Fredensborg's article in *Ekko* immediately point in different directions. It is described as an "essay" in the online version, an "account" in the print magazine, and a personal story in both online and offline editorial leads. The latter is the most accurate, promising a first-person testimony of events presented in chronological order. What justifies the account and essay descriptions, however, with their promise of slightly more rigor and reflection, are the subtler, injured, or indignant stylistic aspects that appear on closer reading.

First and foremost, however, the article presents itself as a high-powered, satirical piece of Gonzo journalism with clear references (see Figure 1) to Thompson's work by way of the "Fear and Loathing . . ." title as well as the cartoon illustrations and the enumerating, associative style of the article summary.

Occasional cues in the text evoke Fredensborg's Gonzo persona, too, signaling that he takes joy in the adventure as well as in the writing itself. First, informal English phrases are thrown into Danish sentences, such as "*Off we go!*" and "He spots me as a new, hopeful film director *dude*."<sup>46</sup> Second, there are original, field-specific plays on words and images, such as "I'll be getting great greasy feedback by the liver pâté buffet." Third, idiosyncratic, disproportionate references are evoked in Fredensborg's mind, for instance, during a staff meeting at the film company:

"We shall have to select among all the producers out here," [said one of the top-notch directors]. Select. As in selection? As in the classic handbook *Doctors from Hell: The Horrific Account of Nazi Experiments on Humans*?<sup>47</sup>

14. JUNI 2011 | 08:00

## Frygt og lede i Avedøre og omegn

Illustration | Jenz Koudahl



En personlig beretning fra en håbefuld instruktørdebutant om hans møde med tv- og filmbranchens hierarki, hykleri og falske forhåbninger. Med velmenende skåltaler, en gevaldig koger og dansk films evige problem: indspistheden.

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Af René Fredensborg / [Ekko #52](#)

Figure 1. “Fear and Loathing in and around Avedøre,” as illustrated and introduced by *Ekko*, June 24, 2011. The illustration is by Jenz Koudahl. The article summary reads: “A hopeful filmmaking debutant’s personal story of his encounter with the hierarchy, hypocrisy, and false hopes of the television and film industry. Complete with well-intended toasts, a massive high, and the notorious problem of the Danish film business: incestuous cliquishness.”<sup>48</sup>

These playful remarks and affective interpretations reinforce Fredensborg’s outsider position and seem designed mainly to amuse his readers. Indeed, the idiosyncratic language choices become the main way for Fredensborg to take responsibility for his story because they stand out as his own.<sup>49</sup> This happens, however, at the expense of empathy with his co-workers (eventually his sources),<sup>50</sup> because he keeps his thoughts to himself quite consistently while immersed and blames this on feeling starstruck and alienated. In this way, the second-order narrative becomes dominant. Because Fredensborg loses his struggle to fit in, he never gets to share a first-order insider perspective which, of course, underscores a central point of his story. Still, one central scene indicates that at least one prominent member of the film community trusts him as an insider, evoking the plot of a conventional initiation story.<sup>51</sup> The scene is also central in terms of reporting because it eventually serves as an exposé of misconduct on the part of a film consultant who appears in the scene:

The consultant . . . asks me if I want something for the nose. I just have to make sure that we are on the same page.

— *Something for the nose?*

“Yes, it’s some really good stuff that I inherited. Come on, let’s line up.”

We go into the men’s room. Jack is cutting and sniffing . . . Jack lines up coke on the back of his hand and offers me his little, personal vacuum cleaner tube. I put my nose down and snort [the cocaine] off his hand. A little too quickly. Jack can probably tell that I am some sort of rookie *also* when it comes to coke.

. . . Jack and I end up in my hotel room. I wake up to the view of an empty coke bag and a tape recorder with recordings of me and the consultant . . . me singing to him in falsetto . . . us having an [indecipherable] conversation . . .<sup>52</sup>

In light of Fredensborg’s aforementioned bonding with his readers, it can be argued that the passage is ironic: his feigned naïveté (“I have to make sure . . .”) invites the consultant to become a victim of this irony, to expose himself and make his intentions explicit. A level of irony may also be read into Fredensborg’s weak-willed way of submitting to social pressure as he extends his role as apprentice in filmmaking and fundraising to this case of illegal drug use. By claiming an amateur persona (“some sort of rookie”) who does not know the local jargon and practices, he performs a remarkably passive responsiveness; the true insiders are featured as active agents who become responsible for his education or his socialization into their line of business on all fronts. This distribution of roles is further stressed by the piece of technical information that Fredensborg is allowed to use the consultant’s personal instrument—a metal straw for sniffing the cocaine that qualifies in the context as the gear of a comparatively skilled professional, that is, a habitual drug user.

What works against the reading of the piece as ironic, however, is the victimization of Fredensborg, which is implied throughout the text. It forms the confessional, injured, and indignant strand of his story. The following passages and sentence fragments, sampled from the article and including its opening lines, are presented to illustrate how the strand is presented textually:

It isn’t even my idea. To apply for funding for a documentary . . . I really just happen to be . . . on a hazy day . . . [Engel, producer at the production company Zentropa,] reads my [Facebook] update . . . —and pop! I have one foot in the film business.

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[Klarlund, director at Zentropa] is the first to warn me . . . “This business is sick. It will destroy you . . . !” He turns out to be right . . . but I am busy coming to terms with my starstrucked-ness . . . Again and again I rehearse the line in my head . . . but never muster the courage to [crack my joke] . . .

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I assume . . . I keep quiet . . . I toast along with them . . .

#

I am even asked to . . . [My producer] makes clear to me . . . a newcomer like me . . .

#

The Danish Film Institute knows this, TV2 knows this. While I myself slowly learn.

#

. . . we are sent to . . . We are asked to . . . I am wrong . . . I learn . . . I try . . . he explains to me . . . he makes clear to me . . . [We] end up . . . My producer thinks I am a good boy . . . [Judge and program director Roland] has explained to us several times . . . [Film consultant Haslund-Christensen] encourages me . . . [Film consultant Jack] encourages me . . . I am allowed to . . . all I want is . . . ”<sup>53</sup>

Despite the story’s retrospective narrative mode, reflection is kept to a minimum, and despite his center-stage position, Fredensborg shows no “first-person major showmanship.”<sup>54</sup> His continued use of inner thoughts, passive forms, and the dative case to position himself stand out; he is consistently acted upon, nudged, and told what to do, and in the final remark, any hint of irony, bold playfulness, and excitement about his style of engagement is gone. Instead, his hurting outsider position is cemented. He ultimately claims to have become the victim of the community to which he had trustingly opened himself and is, in that sense, a victim of his own responsive style of engagement:

[When I tell people that I’m writing this article, most of them warn me about coming across as bitter, to which I usually reply:] “I’m not bitter. All I want is to tell the truth [about the Danish TV and film community] on behalf of all those who are left out.”<sup>55</sup>

The strong, mixed reactions from Fredensborg’s readers to his article are not surprising. That he subscribes to the ethos of a literary journalist who is almost painfully sensitive to the communities and identities he is investigating is bound to become offensive in light of his simultaneous, casual demonstration of a publicist’s power to expose disruptive events. His excited and amused Gonzo poses and familiar persona indicate that he takes personal pleasure in his work and may get carried away, and when this style of engagement and its casual performance has real consequences for people around him, what might have been admirable and entertaining can easily appear careless and malicious.

### **Mind the Responsive Styles of Engagement**

Because it has both artistic and journalistic potential, literary journalism is a professional field in which the dynamics of inspiration and emulation are at work across both generations and nations. Therefore, literary journalism

studies should pay attention to journalistic practices that emerge on a smaller scale alongside more iconic examples. Fredensborg's example makes clear that the ethos of both the broader literary and the specific Gonzo journalism traditions are actively claimed by journalists and evoked by their editors and readers in the framing of stories. That the two paradigms serve as reference points to establish, defend, and attack the aspirations and accomplishments of a piece of contemporary cultural journalism in Denmark suggests they are well established and operative.

Furthermore, as Kristensen argues, the values and practices of literary journalism and cultural journalism—which have been referred to herein as a shared ethos—are filtering into the mainstream journalism that the literary journalism paradigm has traditionally defined itself against.<sup>56</sup> A growing number of journalists are working to transform their style and persona from one assignment to the next and making their individual profiles consistent and relevant in their freelance careers. In the field of arts and culture in Denmark, this means positioning oneself in a tightly knit network of cultural actors, which appears to be part of the reason Fredensborg continues to invoke the Gonzo ethos. It destabilizes his tentative role of cultural-elite insider while giving some authority and artistic license to his offensive deployment and distortion of the literary journalist's responsive stance.

Fredensborg's immersion in and around Avedøre exposes cliquishness in the Danish film industry and causes a film consultant to lose his position. The latter happens as a result of behavior that is not much different from the behavior of the reporter himself, whose story, however, is nonetheless accepted and published. This raises some questions. Does immersion excuse the reporter's conduct? To what extent does the Gonzo logic and aesthetic make up for this behavior? And does it matter whether the journalist ends up looking, in Conover's terms, like an empath or an asshole?

Surely, (un)professional conduct and its justifications are important to readers who are being addressed in an "intimate voice" as they accompany a literary journalist through a story of a culture or community. When performing a responsive style of engagement, a journalist engages his or her audience-companions' sensibilities and sets an example for social interaction. Ideally, then, readers of literary journalism may open themselves to subjective transformation as Fredensborg did, allowing the story to affect or seduce them. This shared ethos of literary journalism stays credible, however, only if its particular enactments are studied and discussed continuously with attention also to less than iconic examples like Fredensborg's, whose immediate potential for seduction proves less than ideal on a closer reading.

Responsiveness as a concept enables discussions that recognize both the

strengths and weaknesses of practitioners who present themselves as dedicated or passionate literary journalists, not in terms of an intuitive, reader-based judgment of character or a question of taste, but as something identifiable at the textual level. A more elaborate formal theory of literary journalism might evolve around responsiveness as a productively ambiguous cardinal virtue that entails both an invested, seductive posture on the one hand and a passive, helpless one on the other.

One important focus point when studying the responsive style is the basic textual positioning of the first-person narrator in a passive form and in the dative case. This starting position can sustain a potentially bold and charming readiness to become immersed and to invite the company and influence of others. Such immersion may then unfold textually as the reporter plays with words and images that are drawn from a specific encounter with a given field or community, exposing a culture and its influence on the reporter. While potentially entertaining, this same style of engagement comes with a built-in disclaimer because it can act as an excuse for a reporter to be impressionable and irresponsible, which is surely worthy of critical attention. By concentrating on the ambivalence of a responsive style of engagement at the textual level, the present study has taken an important cue from Wilson and discussed immersion as a complex form of engagement rather than an in-or-out, pass-or-fail enterprise.<sup>57</sup> The study may also help challenge and qualify offhand characterizations of literary journalists as charming and overly dedicated, and therefore immune to criticism; or of Gonzo journalists as divisive figures who one must either love or hate—even if the specifically *passive*-responsive journalist seems to ask mainly for the latter.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Rothstein and Stolle, "Introduction: Social Capital in Scandinavia," 1; Sønderskov and Dinesen, "Trusting the State, Trusting Each Other?," 187.
- <sup>2</sup> Kristensen, "Churnalism, Cultural (Inter)Mediation and Sourcing in Cultural Journalism," 2171.
- <sup>3</sup> Kristensen, "The Kinship of Literary Journalism and Cultural Journalism," 10–31; Collins, "From Magazines to Newsprint," 209–10.
- <sup>4</sup> Tulloch and Keeble, "Introduction: Mind the Gaps," 5.
- <sup>5</sup> Wilson, "Immersion Journalism and the Second Order Narrative," 347 (emphases in original).
- <sup>6</sup> Moestrup, "Performing the Persona," 7.
- <sup>7</sup> Jensen, "Ham vi ikke vil lege med" [The guy we don't want to play with], sec. 3, 16.
- <sup>8</sup> Fredensborg, "Mit (sølle) liv som aktivist" [My (miserable) life as an activist], sec. 1, 8. (Unless otherwise noted, all translations from Danish are my own).
- <sup>9</sup> Fredensborg, "Frygt og lede i Avedøre og omegn" [Fear and loathing in and around Avedøre], 50–56. Avedøre, a southwestern suburb of Copenhagen, is the home of—and in this context synonymous with—the film city of Avedøre, the "Danish Hollywood" that houses several television and film companies, including Zentropa, which was founded in 1992 by Peter Aalbæk Jensen and internationally award-winning director Lars von Trier. See Filmbyen Avedøre Studios, [http://www.kulturarv.dk/1001fortaellinger/en\\_GB/filmbyen-avedoere-studios](http://www.kulturarv.dk/1001fortaellinger/en_GB/filmbyen-avedoere-studios).
- <sup>10</sup> Fredensborg, "Mit (sølle) liv som aktivist," sec. 1, 8.
- <sup>11</sup> Rasmussen, "Stop den mand," [Stop that man], sec. 1, 35.
- <sup>12</sup> Andersen, "Vi er stolte af René Fredensborg" [We Are Proud of René Fredensborg].
- <sup>13</sup> Andersen.
- <sup>14</sup> Andersen.
- <sup>15</sup> Elkjær, "Gratis." *Nyhedsavisen* was published by 365 Media Scandinavia Ltd from 2006 through 2008.
- <sup>16</sup> Phillips, "From Major to Minor," 391.
- <sup>17</sup> Mosser, "What's Gonzo about Gonzo Journalism?," 88.
- <sup>18</sup> See Isager, "Playful Imitation at Work," 78–96; Alexander and Isager, *Fear and Loathing Worldwide*.
- <sup>19</sup> Kremmer, "Gonzo Down Under," 13.
- <sup>20</sup> Fredensborg, *Hønehunde* [Bird Dogs: Novel].
- <sup>21</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.
- <sup>22</sup> Cf., respectively, Coward, "Confessional Journalism," 91–101; Kristensen, "The Kinship of Literary Journalism and Cultural Journalism," 10–31.
- <sup>23</sup> Isager, "Hvem vil være wannabe?," 137–48.
- <sup>24</sup> Moestrup, "Performing the Persona," 107–109.
- <sup>25</sup> Kristensen, "Churnalism, Cultural (Inter)Mediation and Sourcing in Cultural Journalism," 2171.
- <sup>26</sup> In October 2020, Fredensborg aired a podcast series, "En Gonzo siger good-



bye” [A Gonzo says goodbye], <https://podcasts.apple.com/dk/podcast/en-gonzosiger-goodbye/id1534736890>. Working in collaboration with a journalist colleague, Anders Christiansen, they discussed Fredensborg’s peculiar media profile and history, allegedly in preparation for a farewell performance at a Copenhagen theater.

<sup>27</sup> Thompson, *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*, 18.

<sup>28</sup> Larsen, “–Du er en klam lille lort.”

<sup>29</sup> Steen, “Afløber pengene tilbage, Fredensborg!” [Give back the money, Fredensborg!].

<sup>30</sup> Hoff and Christensen, “Filminstituttet ansætter kontroversiel instruktør.”

<sup>31</sup> Nicotra, “The Seduction of Samuel Butler,” 49–52.

<sup>32</sup> Nicotra, 39.

<sup>33</sup> Nicotra, 45.

<sup>34</sup> Wilson, “Immersion Journalism and the Second-Order Narrative,” 345.

<sup>35</sup> Hermann, “The Temporal Tipping Point,” 493. See Kristensen, “The Kinship of Literary Journalism and Cultural Journalism,” 10–31.

<sup>36</sup> Hermann, “The Temporal Tipping Point,” 493.

<sup>37</sup> Hermann, 500.

<sup>38</sup> Kristensen, “Churnalism, Cultural (Inter)Mediation and Sourcing in Cultural Journalism,” 2168–86.

<sup>39</sup> Conover, *Immersion: A Writer’s Guide*, 109–110.

<sup>40</sup> Conover, 110.

<sup>41</sup> Conover, 108.

<sup>42</sup> Kramer, “Breakable Rules for Literary Journalists,” 28 (emphasis in original).

<sup>43</sup> Boylan, quoted in Sims, preface to *Literary Journalism in the Twentieth Century*, ix.

<sup>44</sup> Vincent, *Self-Made Man: My Year Disguised as a Man*; Vincent, *Voluntary Madness: My Year Lost and Found in the Loony Bin*.

<sup>45</sup> Hunter S. Thompson and other journalists in the Gonzo tradition have specifically developed responses to drugs both stylistically and as component of immersion. See, for instance, Alexander, “‘The Right Kind of Eyes,’ ” 19–36; van Belle, “‘Among Madmen and Crooks,’ ” 123–42.

<sup>46</sup> Fredensborg, “Frygt og lede i Avedøre og omegn,” 51. Italics added here to indicate the English phrases that appeared in the original Danish text.

<sup>47</sup> Fredensborg, 51, referring to Vivien Spitz’s 2005 *Doctors from Hell: The Horrific Account of Nazi Experiments on Humans* (Boulder, CO: Sentient Publications).

<sup>48</sup> Fredensborg, “Frygt og lede i Avedøre og omegn” [Fear and loathing in and around Avedøre].

<sup>49</sup> For a development of this argument in a different case study, see Isager, “Loathing in Southern Denmark,” 111–22.

<sup>50</sup> Phillips, “From Major to Minor,” 389–91.

<sup>51</sup> Wilson, “Immersion Journalism and the Second-Order Narrative,” 349.

<sup>52</sup> Fredensborg, “Frygt og lede i Avedøre og omegn” [Fear and loathing in and around Avedøre], 54 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>53</sup> Fredensborg, 51–56.

<sup>54</sup> Phillips, "From Major to Minor," 389–91.

<sup>55</sup> Fredensborg, "Frygt og lede i Avedøre og omegn" [Fear and loathing in and around Avedøre], 56.

<sup>56</sup> Kristensen, "The Kinship of Literary Journalism and Cultural Journalism," 10–31.

<sup>57</sup> Wilson, "Immersion Journalism and the Second-Order Narrative," 351.

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