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For Elisabeth

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Introduction

When I first saw the movie adaptation of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* around 2001, I was so fascinated by the wild story that evolves around Raoul Duke that I bought the book the next day. I read it, held a presentation in my English class and I remember the skeptical reactions of my classmates when I argued that “*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is not about drugs”. Most of them did not understand that there was more to the story than just a journalist going crazy on drugs in Vegas. Hunter Thompson's style and the way he described the 60s seemed more appropriate and honest than anything I had ever read before. During the following years, I read almost all of his books and became a huge fan. When the journalist killed himself in 2005, it was clear to me that the world had lost a great writer.

Hunter Stockton Thompson was one of the most important reporters of the 1960s who witnessed and experienced a time marked by social unrest and a new consciousness that arose with the counterculture. He vividly conveyed his perceptions of the time in his texts and never hid his opinion about what was happening in the American nation. After publishing *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, he became an idol of the counterculture and today, he is a pop cultural icon, whose ideas are sold on t-shirts and posters. However, Thompson was not a friend of his own popularity because people never wanted the “real” Hunter S. Thompson but Raoul Duke, the crazy journalist, and focused on the writer's open drug use and excesses. For many scholars, Thompson's work is still not much more than shameful gibberish written in a drug-frenzy.

This lack of interest in Hunter Thompson's work on a scholarly level sparked the idea that I could pay tribute to the late author by writing a thesis about his social and political criticism and its importance for American literature. Due to the subtitle of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* - “A savage journey into the heart of the American Dream”- I reread some of his work, paying attention to his view of the American Dream and started researching. First, I

had to understand the vast concept of the American Dream, which probably was the most difficult part. With the help of my supervisor, I managed to keep my research question as simple as possible and decided to focus on how Hunter S. Thompson engaged the American Dream in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*.

Due to a scholarship from the University of Vienna and the help of my supervisor Univ.-Prof. Dr. Astrid Fellner, I had the possibility to do parts of my research at Stanford University in Palo Alto, California, where I had access to innumerable resources from which this thesis has definitely profited. Through the proximity to San Francisco, I was able to retrace Hunter Thompson's steps in the '60s countercultural epicenter.

William McKeen, who has published two very informative biographies about Thompson, and Max Stites, who compared the myth of the American Dream in the works of Charles Dickens and Hunter Thompson in his publication *Fellow Travellers in the Land of Fear and Loathing: Dickens, Thompson and the American Dream*, were so friendly as to be available for interviews that helped me very much to understand Thompson, his work and his view of the American Dream. The transcripts of these interviews can be found in Appendix A.

A major point that I had to understand before writing this thesis was that people need to structure the feelings and events with which they are confronted into a narrative. Andrew Delbanco explains “when that story leads somewhere and thereby helps us navigate through life to its inevitable terminus in death, it gives us hope” (1). He claims that “if such a sustaining narrative established itself over time in the minds of a substantial number of people, we call it culture” (1). The American Dream is a great example of such a story that established itself over the centuries and has become an important part of American culture. The narrative provides people with hope and without it the first settlers would have never

accomplished their journey across the Atlantic. Nevertheless, one has to bear in mind that where is hope, there is also melancholy and it is often argued that American literature has largely been influenced by such a melancholic strive to find something worth living for as abundance does not cure the inner longing for fulfillment (see Delbanco 2).

In my thesis, I attempt to outline that Thompson followed this melancholic tradition and therefore concerned himself with the myth of the American Dream as a basic element of American culture. I will show that the writer engaged symbols and themes, which are related to the myth, for example, the Puritan roots of the Dream, the Christian moral or the dark, violent side of the myth that was always present in American society. I will also illustrate that Hunter Thompson used several narrative and journalistic techniques in order to express his subjective view of the American nation in the socially perturbed 60s.

In Chapter One, I position Thompson's work and detect what kind of literature he produced. To achieve this, I briefly outline the historical background in which Thompson was working and focus on the American counterculture of the 1960s. As there is little agreement about which genre one can ascribe to the journalist, I try to show that although Thompson shared many aspects with the New Journalists, he was an outlaw journalist that broke all genre rules. To conclude, I introduce *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*.

Chapter Two is an attempt at explaining the concept of the American Dream through a historical review from the Puritans and their hope for a better future, the American Frontier and its dream, the *Declaration of Independence* and its implications for the dream, as well as Horatio Alger's popular stories that have nourished the myth the American Dream ever since. I then go ahead in time to the 1960s and the American Dream of the counterculture that influenced Thompson's writing.

Chapter Three contains an analysis of Thompson's work. I will dismantle the texts

according to recurring themes and symbols, for example, the symbolic landscape of Las Vegas that bears special significance for the American Dream. Another crucial theme on which I focus is Christian symbolism, mostly expressed through Thompson's narrators that can be linked to the Puritan roots of American culture. Furthermore, I will examine the fear that Thompson's characters experience, which is caused by internal and external events, for example, drugs and the surreal reality of Las Vegas, and the loathing they turn to in order to cope with what they experience. I also mention the similarities between the Vice character of Early English drama and Thompson's narrators that love to play pranks and always display coruscating humor in which criticism is hidden. Finally, I will point out how the narrators perceive their environment and society and how they express their antipathy for, for example, authorities and fellow citizens.

The next chapter's central point is the schizophrenia of Thompson's narrators: their righteous thoughts and their violent actions. I will show how Thompson articulates his disillusionment with the American system as his innate belief in democracy is betrayed, and how this is reflected in the violent reality, in which his characters find themselves. I will explain how the author realizes this violence through various techniques, for example, a vivid imagery that turns politicians, society and even himself into predatory beasts. Or the journalistic elements that support his viewpoints, for example, newspaper clippings or author's notes that inform the readers about the narrators' struggle with reality.

The main motivation behind this thesis is to contribute to the scholarly perception of Hunter S. Thompson and to shift the focus from him being a drug culture icon to him being a serious writer. I want to show that he was an important voice in the chorus of great American writers and critics that innovated an unprecedented and irreproducible style that helped to express the fear and the loathing many people felt in the wild 60s. He was a mouthpiece for a whole generation that was often ignored by American society.

1. Loved & Loathed – The Art of Not Fitting into One Box

Hunter Stockton Thompson (HST) was a highly controversial writer. He was either loved or hated, his work praised as the masterpiece of a genius or disdained as the pointless gibberish of a drug-addict. His public image was larger than life – the myth he created around himself was sometimes more notorious than the people Thompson wanted to interview. He was called insane and a wannabe-journalist who lacked objectivity and had no respect for nothing, or a misunderstood mastermind who comprehended the American 1960s in a way no one else did.

Clearly, Thompson's place in American literature is one to be discussed since he has often been neglected and excluded from it due to his nonconformist behavior and style of writing. His position as a writer is as unclear as the real amount of drugs he used to consume. Tom Wolfe included him in the tradition of New Journalism, but Thompson protested and distanced himself from it, calling Wolfe “too crusty to *participate* in his stories” (HST, *Shark Hunt* 108). His colleague Bill Cardoso¹ labeled Thompson's style as “pure gonzo”, a term that has remained undefined but has entered the common American vocabulary (Perry in Hirst 5). Thompson himself was not happy that his style of writing was called *gonzo*, meaning “crazy or extremist.”² He, however, did accept this label since there seemed to be no other category or name that fit his style. He later called *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* “a failed experiment” in gonzo journalism because it did not adhere to the most basic rule of what gonzo journalism implied for Thompson – no editing or revising is allowed (HST qtd. in McKeen, *Thompson* 49). In Hellmann's literary analysis, HST's work is categorized as “new fiction” and is opposed to New Journalism. Hellmann claims it to be part of “a contemporary genre in which journalistic material is presented in the forms of fiction” (Hellmann 1). Jerome Klinkowitz, on the other hand, named him “a Superfictionist” because “he has created

¹ Spelling differs in sources: Cardoso in HST, *America* 99, Cardoza in Perry, *Terrible Saga* and in Whitmer, *Twisted Life*.

² See Thorne, 97 ff.

his own mythology, his own life of fiction” (*Life of Fiction* 31), and Daniel Grubb concludes by calling Thompson an “outlaw journalist” (66).

Obviously, Thompson's work does not conform to any conventions and breaks all rules. He did neither adhere to any stylistic boundaries except his own, nor obey any rules except his own. Therefore, it is difficult to position HST correctly in any of the corners of the literature ring without generalizing or reducing his work. Instead, one can find similarities and differences that make his writings neither one, nor the other, and him a controversial figure in American post-war literature.

However, in order to understand his work, one has to consider the time and mood in which this particular journalist has been working – the wild American 60s, a time that left no stone unturned in American society and affected every American citizen in some or another way.

1.1 Turn on, Tune in, Drop out – the American 1960s and its Counterculture

There are not many other times in American history that have left such vivid memories than the decade of the 1960s. For many Americans, it was a time where everything seemed possible and people fought for the idealistic goals they had set. The images of the 1960s, of, for example, the batik clothes wearing, dope-smoking flower children with peace signs around their necks, dancing in the streets of San Francisco to the sound of the Grateful Dead, are ever present, but represent only a tiny aspect of this time that was marked by the struggle for social change. The Vietnam War, the student protest movement and civil rights risings polarized American society and caused confusion and chaos in the American nation.

According to David Farber, the 1960s and the confrontation the period entailed were caused by two contradicting sets of values that were present in American society: First, the postwar and Eisenhower ideology of “discipline, delayed gratification, good character and the

acceptance of hard work done in rigidly hierarchical workplaces” (4). This perspective had developed in the post-WWII years due to the Cold War and its constant threat of communism, the war in Korea, as well as the possibility of a nuclear war that had altogether “driven Americans into a psychological retreat” (Klinkowitz, *Imaginative Acts* 5). The traditional, working class set of values was then challenged by new approaches to life that slowly came into existence at the end of the 1950s and the early 1960s: “license, immediate gratification, mutable lifestyle and an egalitarian, hedonistic pursuit of self-expression” (Farber 4). Bell calls these two strands of thinking the “cultural contradictions of consumerism that had developed due to the postwar prosperity and the rise of national advertising campaigns that gave people the idea and the possibility of limitless consumption (Bell in Farber 5). *Lifestyle* was invented in the early 1960s and with its rise, “worries about the moral quality of “uninhibited search for self-expression” became apparent (Farber 55). This ambivalence between hard work and hedonism created tensions.

According to the Gramscian concept of hegemony, dominant groups of a culture, the hegemonic bloc, temporarily exercise control over the culture of certain groups. Thereby a series of alliances between different social groups are formed which constantly negotiate their place in society and thus provoke a struggle over meaning as the groups promote different sets of values (see Barker 66ff). Opposed to this hegemonic bloc, there is a counter-hegemonic bloc that challenges the dominant values and “seeks to gain ascendancy within civil society” (Barker 67). These separate blocs are constantly negotiating their status in the spheres of society. In the American 1960s, such a “struggle over meaning” between two different blocs and two different sets of values, different discourses, became noticeable.

The hegemonic bloc and its “traditional” set of values had fortified its position in the years after the WWII that brought economical prosperity and financial stability to most white

Americans. Eisenhower's America was a mainly patriarchal society marked by the constant fear of communism and nuclear assaults, as well as racism and inequality. People secluded themselves from the outside world and preferred to watch their nation on the TV set that had become an indispensable tool in most American households by the beginning of the 1960s. With the TV came a new desire for consumer products and the promotion of free choice – the choice to buy whatever product made one happy (see Farber 5). Especially for young Americans, this consumerist freedom of choice was attractive and many of them began rejecting “authorities' right to tell them what music, clothes and even drugs were culturally and morally acceptable” since it contradicted what advertisement told them (Farber 5).

Further arguments that triggered the birth of a different culture comprise the fact the youth was no longer dependent on their parents since by the mid 1960s most of them had their own money in their pockets. Their generation was larger in number than the one of their parents, who had suffered the Great Depression and the WWII (see Farber 57). These young Americans did not only indulge in consumerism but also in education, which was reflected in the growing number of college graduates (see Farber 57). These elements added up to stimulate changes in the youth's perception of the world. According to Farber, “by the early 1960s, young people – youth as they came to be known – had years together to develop their own world” (Farber 57).

However, more threatening to American society than the resistant youth was the Vietnam War. It separated the public into two groups – the antiwar protestors and patriotic Americans who thought that one has to stand behind one's nation in no matter what circumstances and opposed any kind of protest (see Farber 167 ff.). Some of the most memorable examples of antiwar protestors that have become famous all over the world were the so-called hippies and freaks “of what was then called the counterculture” (168). But what was this counterculture?

As its name implies, it was a culture opposed to the mainstream culture of the time, or as Gramsci might put it, the hegemonic bloc. This counterculture was a hard to define phenomenon since it incorporated various subgroups, styles and attitudes. Farber calls it “a way of life, a community, an infrastructure, and even an economy” (169). Peter Braunstein and Michael W. Doyle explain the counterculture as an “inherently unstable collection of attitudes, tendencies, postures, gestures, ”lifestyles,” ideals, visions, hedonistic pleasures, moralisms, negations, and affirmations” (10). As opposed to a subculture, a counterculture is “a fully fledged oppositional movement with a distinctively separate set of norms and values that are produced dialectically out of a sharply delineated conflict with the dominant society” (Braunstein and Doyle 7). It is very difficult to put one's finger on the 1960s counterculture as it was far from being a homogeneous group.

Farber argues that the Diggers, a group of thinkers that organized free stores, crash pads, street theaters, free concerts, an instant news service, and so forth, in San Francisco, represented the counterculture's visionary heart and were fueled by the idea of “breaking free from the money nexus and the profit motive that underwrote American society” (Farber 170). Logically, these visionaries were appalled by America's involvement in the Vietnam War. They did not only protest against it but also believed that in order to stop it, they “had to fight the mad internal nightmare of control” they experienced in the U.S. (Farber 170 ff.). Some of these revolutionaries were famous poets and writers such as Allen Ginsberg or Ken Kesey, who in their popular works offered ideological cornerstones for the younger generation that strove for societal changes. According to their worldview, American society would only change “if and when enough people had transformed themselves” (Braunstein and Doyle 10). This utopian vision of a better future through internal change characterized the counterculture in the period between 1964 and 1968. With the reelection of president Nixon in 1968, the fragmentation and decline of the counterculture into a more violent protest movement set in.

As is widely known, drug trips were part of the counterculture since according to many of its main leaders “a state of intoxication and psychic exploration were requisites to a higher wisdom of the body and soul” (Farber 172). It was “the consumption and distribution of illegal drugs that more than any other factor was responsible for the creation and development of America's many counterculture enclaves” and also “the single most important factor linking the small counterculture with the vast majority of going-to-school, living-at-home young people” (Farber 173). But the 60s youth was not the first generation that took drugs – the generation of their parents consumed large amounts of alcohol and nicotine, but were moreover prescribed sedatives, tranquilizers and amphetamines accompanying their psychological therapies, turning America into a nation on psychotropics (see Farber 176 ff.). Their kids did not welcome the drugs that were accepted by the establishment, but rather, in pure consumerist fashion, felt free to choose their drugs themselves. What they chose was marihuana and LSD, which had a huge effect on the counterculture, making it grow with the rising amount of trips that were sold. This hallucinogenic drug did not only alter the states of mind of the hippies and flower children but also provoked a community feeling and made the world appear as a place without rules where everything was possible.

One of these new possibilities that opened up to the counterculture was sexual freedom – the youth had grown up with often “hypocritical social norms...that attempted to keep sex hidden, illicit and ‘dirty’” and some of the countercultural groups “saw themselves at the forefront of a sexual revolution” (Farber 183). This shift of perception also influenced college students to speak out publicly against the “conventional American morality” and in favor of oral contraceptives and the destigmatization of premarital sex (Farber 184).

Due to its culture and the magnetism it exerted, the Haight-Ashbury district and countercultural epicenter in San Francisco, had become a tourist spot by 1968 and some entrepreneurs saw a chance to make money by turning the “main nerve” of the counterculture

into a business. By then the counterculture also attracted violent people like Charles Manson or the Hell's Angels (see Farber 186). According to Farber, “about 15 percent of the young people drawn into the Haight were ‘psychotics and religious obsessives’ and about 45 percent were dropouts, lowlifes, and hard livers, most of them young men looking to find sex and get stoned as often as possible” (Farber 186). Some people who witnessed these changes, like Hunter S. Thompson, who had lived in the countercultural centre in Haight-Ashbury, moved on and out.

By the end of 1968, the counterculture was getting out of control and the mass media coverage on TV, radio and in print contributed to the “Haight-Ashbury hype” by exploiting its stories. Towards the end of the 60s, most of the countercultural dwelling places had “devolved into combination tourist traps and hard drug, runaway-dropout scenes”, while “the trappings and some of the practices of freak culture had then made way into the mainstream culture” (Farber 188). The visionaries that had stimulated the counterculture's original ideology moved on to rural communities and often engaged in the mystical faction of the counterculture that later became the New Age movement (see Farber 188).

Although the “hippie way of life” did not become part of the dominant culture, many of its ideas influenced the student and radical political movement that gained strength at the same time. Triggered by the Vietnam War and the sight of thousands of young Americans coming home in body bags, more and more students participated in antiwar protests and more general, in protests against their lack of freedom on the college campuses, for example, against not being allowed to openly express their political opinions. The first eruption that subsequently elicited similar events was the founding of the Berkeley Free Speech Movement in 1965. The student activists “dreamed of bringing that democratic energy [the one of the Civil Rights movement] to a white student movement dedicated to racial justice but also a radically reoriented foreign and domestic political agenda” (Farber 192). The student protest

movement incorporated antiwar or equality protestors, as well as the Green movement, the Women's Rights movement and the Gay and Lesbian Rights movement. According to David Farber, “the projection of twenty years of stasis indefinitely into the future promised the inheritance of a sterile world without any chance to alter it” and so the students felt the need to challenge the dominant national beliefs by freely expressing their opinions and protesting against the establishment (199). The movement was influenced by the Southern civil rights struggles of the 1950s and their tactics of sit-ins and protest marches (see Gair 31).

For some students, mere protesting was not enough and by 1968, they were disillusioned by the lack of changes the nonviolent activism had stimulated. Thus, militant groups appeared by the end of the 1960s, like, for example, the Black Panthers who often gave impetus for riots and violence. By 1970 at the latest, violence had become an excruciating reality in America – especially the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. led to an outbreak of riots in over 130 places all over the United States (see Farber 209). The militant groups, however, weakened all movements struggling for social justice as people considered them too radical and rejected their tactics.

As stated by Farber, the average white middle-class American adult felt negatively affected by the protest movements and “called for Law and Order”, while “the mainstream politics and national policy were imploding” (210). By 1970, most Americans had understood that their nation was experiencing a major cultural and political change, although most of the countercultural goals have never been realized. Nevertheless, the demands of the 60s sparked changes, for example, the “freedom of expression had become practically limitless, gender roles were up for reexamination, and the spiritual and religious enthusiasms multiplied” (Farber 263 ff.). Moreover, the 60s taught the Americans skepticism about their nation's foreign and domestic policy. The frustration with their system was later reflected in 1970s and 80s and the baby boomers turning into yuppies and “to drugs and the relentless search for

individual pleasure that consumer capitalism seemed to promise” (Farber 267).

As a means to cope with the general feeling of protest and struggle against the establishment, people invented new ways of describing the reality they experienced in order to make sense of it. The conventional way of dealing with what was happening in the nation did not suffice to explain the events of that time. Therefore, new ways of making sense of the 1960s reality came into life. One such innovation was New Journalism – a strand of journalism that evolved in the early 60s, and one could claim that it represented some aspects of the counterculture as it rebelled against conventional journalism. Tom Wolfe, its main artist who included Hunter S. Thompson in the realm of New Journalists, first theorized it.

1.2 What is so New about New Journalism?

If one takes the basic definition of New Journalism, Hunter S. Thompson seems to be a perfect example of New Journalistic writing. According to Fowler, New Journalism “occupies a sort of demilitarized zone between two writing traditions, where fact and fiction are free to fraternize” (Fowler qtd. in Haas 45). Hannes Haas claims the main goal of New Journalism is to “convey the researched facts in descriptive contexts through techniques of fiction...to reconstruct subjective versions of truth on the basis of research and observation”³ (Haas 47).

One could claim that the New Journalists represented a journalistic aspect of the 1960s counterculture since according to Wolfe, “the New Journalists – Parajournalists – had the whole crazed obscene uproarious Mammon-faced drug-soaked mau-mau lust-oozing 60s in America all to themselves” (Wolfe 31). They felt that conventional journalism failed to describe the events of the 60s in an appropriate manner so that people could make sense of what was happening in their nation. Some writers, mainly journalists and reporters, started

³ My translation of: “mit Techniken der Fiktion die recherchierten Fakten in erklärenden Zusammenhängen zu vermitteln...auf der Basis von Recherchen und Beobachtungen deklariert subjektive Versionen von Wirklichkeit zu (re)konstruieren”.

covering events in an unconventional way and “one was aware only that all of a sudden there was some sort of artistic excitement in journalism, and that was a new thing in itself” (Wolfe 23). Wolfe argues that new styles of living evolved in the 1960s and that “these styles were right there for all to see, ricocheting off every eyeball – and again a few amazed journalists working in the new form [New Journalism] had it all to themselves” since in the beginning conventional media was not interested in, for example, the counterculture (30). One has to remember that many Americans did not take the events of the early 60s seriously and turned their back in disgust on the counterculture and the protest movement. The New Journalists, who often were part of these events, reported in a new fashion and a very emotional and subjective style, trying to grasp the feeling of the time and to represent the other side of the medal that conventional journalists rarely investigated.

Tom Wolfe, the father of New Journalism, like many other scholars, included Hunter S. Thompson in the league of New Journalists. For him, HST made use of the four crucial techniques that differentiated the new form of journalism from conventional journalism (see Wolfe 31 ff.). First, he composed his texts scene-by-scene, giving the reader the feeling of witnessing the events the author tries to describe. Then, he often recorded the full dialogue of a certain situation in his text in order to represent the people and the situation. Moreover, Wolfe claims that HST made use of a third-person point of view, “presenting every scene to the reader through the eyes of a particular character” (32). This assertion might be true for some of HST's texts, but more often he speaks from a first person that Wolfe calls “limiting...- a point of view that often proves irrelevant to the story and irritating to the reader” (Wolfe, 32). The final distinction that according to Wolfe makes Thompson a New Journalist is “the recording of everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs, styles of furniture...and other symbolic details that might exist within a scene” (32). For Wolfe, these details help to recreate and explain “people's *status life*...the entire pattern of behavior and

possessions through which people express their position in the world or what they think it is or what they hope it to be” (32). While Wolfe's writing is very detailed and meticulous, HST often avoids going into detail, but rather takes few features that distinguish a situation and the people he is describing and highlights them in his text. In some respects, Hunter S. Thompson does fit Wolfe's New Journalism – he definitely applied the crucial techniques, he worked hard on his style and expression, he began as a “low life” reporter but always applied novelistic techniques (see Wolfe 25 ff.). But does this make him a real New Journalist?

A different approach to Thompson can be found in John Hellmann's work *From Fact To Fiction: From New Journalism to New Fiction*. Hellmann bases his literary analysis on the assumption that “since it [journalism] is a product of the human mind and language, journalism can never passively mirror the whole reality, but must instead actively select, transform, and interpret it” (4). For him, the problem with conventional journalism is that it does not admit its selectivity and limitedness and calls itself objective (see Hellmann 4). New Journalists shared distaste for conventional journalism and HST started his research on the *Hell's Angels* book “in direct reaction against conventional journalism” (Hellmann, 7). HST thought that conventional journalists misrepresented the motorcycle gang because they had only talked to the police, but not to a single member of the gang. Hellmann further argues that all the societal and political changes in the U.S. in the 1960s triggered a change in journalism – there was the need for a new sort of journalism in order to deal with the altered reality of war, race riots, the assassination of JFK, drugs, hippies, and so forth. These events could not be explained in a conventional way by answering the five W-questions (9).

However, for Hellmann, Thompson is more a fabulist than a journalist who creates pieces that “read(s) remarkably like the parodic work of fabulation” (67). In this sense, HST's work is compared to the writings of Kurt Vonnegut since both authors “confront their subjects with the controlling power of parody, bringing a...bizarre fantasy to them” (67 ff.).

Whereas Vonnegut is “seeding his fabulation with facts”, Thompson is “spicing his journalism with fantasies” (68). The importance of Thompson's persona, the caricature to whom he gives his voice, is also highlighted (see Hellmann 70) – this persona usually is greatly exaggerated and stylized and cannot be compared to Wolfe's more realistic descriptions of people. Additionally, in Thompson's writing there are instances where the reader does not know if what is described has really happened or simply was an invention of the writer's fantasy (see Hellmann 73), whereas in Wolfe's journalism one can assume that most of the information is true. Hellmann concludes that New Journalism was a new form of fiction that appeared in the 1960s due to the general changes in society and that HST was definitely part of a new generation of writers, who felt free to mix fact and fiction and did not obey conventional stylistic rules (99). However, he does clarify that Thompson has a special position within these New Journalists because of his exaggerated characters and self-caricature that are crucial parts of his writing (99ff.).

Thompson himself did not like to be included in the category of New Journalists. As mentioned above, for him the New Journalists, especially Tom Wolfe, did participate too little in their stories - they were watching situations from a safe distance, while Thompson was right in the middle of the events, sometimes he was the event. Hannes Haas argues that although Thompson can be seen as a New Journalist, it is necessary to acknowledge that he went one step further by turning “from the observer to the actor, who actively influences the action and thus alters it” (68).⁴ Thompson's journalism differs as far as he was more active in his stories and sometimes even set the scene, so that the boundaries between the journalist who tells the story and the actors in the story vanished - “the journalist-image and the narrator-image become blurred” (Bleichner 147).⁵ Wolfe instead did not risk getting lost in the events and always remained in a more passive, observing role in order to be able to report

⁴ My translation of: “vom Beobachter zum Akteur, der aktiv in das Geschehen eingreift und dieses damit verändert”.

⁵ My translation of: “das Journalisten-Image und das Erzähler-Image beginnen zu verschwimmen”.

from a third-person perspective.

In his book, *The Life of Fiction*, Jerome Klinkowitz presents many reasons why HST is not a New Journalist but more of what he calls a SuperFictionist and compares him with Ronald Sukenick and Kurt Vonnegut Jr. Klinkowitz admits that HST shares some similarities with the New Journalists when he states that “some make the case that HST is a New Journalist, as Tom Wolfe uses the term. Thompson is so only to the extent that he employs some methods of traditional fiction to present his otherwise documentary material” (33). He moreover contradicts Wolfe's positioning of Thompson and claims that “Thompson's methods go beyond traditional fiction into those of more innovative art” and that “he identifies with (and even becomes part of) the action more than does Tom Wolfe or most of the other New Journalists” and with that, supports Thompson's own opinion of the New Journalists (33). Klinkowitz continues by giving specific examples of why Thompson should not be labeled a New Journalist, mainly focusing on the various techniques HST applied in his work, such as the addition of personal comments, transcriptions of phone calls or recordings, news clippings, and so forth, “all spatially organized as a graphic comment on the action” in the form of a collage (36). However, for Klinkowitz, the main difference between Thompson and the New Journalists is his “self-reflexive manner”: “He never disguises the fact that he is a half-cranked geek journalist caught in the center of action. Right in the middle of story, he will break down, but the breakdown itself carries much of the 'information' about the country of the writer's own imagination which he is, like Sukenick, reporting” (36). By comparing the SuperFictionists like Vonnegut and Sukenick to the Cubists in art, Klinkowitz highlights his idea that these writers “rearrange(d) our visual sensors so that we see all planes – all sides of the story at once” and by representing the “strange and terrible elements which just may be a crucial part of our lives”, they multiply the perspectives, which for him is “more a SuperFictional than journalistic” approach (39).

Thompson produces multiple perspectives by applying several specific techniques and stylistic aspects to his work, such as “by including references to his own mythology as a writer”, which means the persona and the myth that had created around his person, or “by constantly downgrading his own paranoid fantasies in proportion to the raving madness of the so-called straight world” (39ff.). The final important distinction that separates Thompson from the New Journalists is the fact that he includes himself not only in the stories, but underlines the fact that he is not much different, not “better” or more “normal” than the people and events in which he is situated. Klinkowitz describes this as “Thompson's candid admission that he is a trash addict himself, that the conditions of our time have infected him even more than the others” (43). This is visible in the final paragraph of Thompson's article *The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved* when he realizes:

My eyes had finally opened enough for me to focus on the mirror across the room and I was stunned at the shock of recognition. For a confused instant, I thought that Ralph had 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 (HST, *Shark Hunt* 37).

Klinkowitz's assumptions can be concluded by removing the New Journalism label from Thompson's writing and by highlighting that although HST applied techniques similar to the New Journalists, his work must be set apart or seen as an extension of New Journalism. This position on HST is shared by many scholars who have attempted to prove that Thompson's work is more radical in terms of technique and style as any of the other writers who have been associated with New Journalism.

In the German publication *Grenzgänger: Formen des New Journalism*, Hunter S. Thompson is associated with the New Journalists. Haas states HST as one of the protagonists of New Journalism next to Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer and Joan Didion, while acknowledging that each of these authors was dealing with different topics and applying different styles and techniques (see Haas 67). Furthermore, he characterizes Thompson's style as similar to “method-acting”- “he [HST] lives what he writes and changes with the role. Immersion becomes identification”⁶, which is definitely a technique the New Journalists applied, but Haas also points out that Thompson does not stop here, but makes one step further and becomes the main actor in the scene he describes and through this position actually changes the scene (see 68). Due to his highly subjective viewpoint most of the information Thompson presents cannot be proven as “true” or “real” and subsequently some of his texts can not be categorized as New Journalism since the New Journalists did at least stick to some facts and represent what they have experienced and not what they have fantasized (see Haas 69). According to this, Thompson must be considered separate from classical New Journalists like Tom Wolfe.

Bleichner also considers Thompson a protagonist of New Journalism, but differentiates between “true” New Journalism and Thompson's Gonzo Journalism in which, as mentioned above, “the author-ego is in the centre of the self-dramatization” (147).⁷ Therefore, Thompson's own assertion that the level of author participation makes the difference between the New Journalists, who in general did not go as far as Thompson, and him, who sometimes was the action himself, is confirmed.

Daniel Grubb states that the genre of New Journalism itself is hard to define due to “the vast spectrum of style found under the rubric of New Journalism” and all the sub-genres the category comprises such as literary journalism, participatory journalism and gonzo

⁶ My translation of: “er [HST] lebt, was er schreibt und verändert sich mit der Rolle. Immersion wird zu Identifikation”.

⁷ My translation of: “das Autoren-Ich im Zentrum der Selbstinszenierung steht”.

journalism (2). What Grubb, however, emphasizes is that the level of participation of Wolfe and Thompson do not correspond. He argues that while Wolfe “is obviously in the scene” but “rarely jumps right into the middle of the action”, Thompson often becomes the story himself (2). Therefore, it can again be argued that Thompson's style shares elements with the New Journalists, but that he differentiated himself through his participation in the action.

However, all of these scholars do assert Thompson a special position within the within or apart from the New Journalists that has mostly been labeled *Gonzo Journalism* – a term that Thompson, as mentioned above, applied only cautiously. This genre is neither well defined, nor are there any other writers who have been labeled *gonzo*.

1.3 Pure Gonzo Journalism?⁸

Gonzo is a strange little word that entered the English language in the 1980s although its meaning is not clear and has remained a riddle for scholars. The person who first uttered it in connection with Hunter Thompson was Bill Cardoso, a contemporary and colleague of Thompson who worked as editor for the *Boston Globe Sunday Magazine*. He was the one who, in a letter to Thompson which expressed his excitement with Thompson's *Kentucky Derby* article from 1970, labeled Thompson's style of writing as *gonzo*: “Forget all this shit you've been writing, this is it; this is pure Gonzo. If this is a start, keep rolling” (Cardoso qtd. in Perry 142). But what does *gonzo* mean?

An etymological research conducted by Martin Hirst did reveal neither its real origin, nor its true meaning. What is known is that Cardoso claimed it to stem from French “gonzeaux”, meaning “shining path” (see Carroll 124). However, this interpretation does not correspond to any dictionary entries. According to Hirst, the closest French expression he could find was “gonze”, meaning “guy” or “bloke” (see 6ff.). The word's earliest appearance

⁸ Quotation from HST, *Vegas* 12.

in a dictionary dates to the Random House dictionary of 1987, which refers to HST's journalism and states its origin to be either Italian or Spanish (see Hirst 6). The Italian and French root words “gonzo” (meaning “fool” or “dolt”) and “ganso” (meaning “idiot” or “bumpkin”) do not correspond to the adjective's meaning in Thompson's case since Thompson's gonzo style “is neither dull, nor foolish” (Hirst 7). Due to the various different and often contradicting explanations, it is not possible to pin its meaning down to either a single origin or a single meaning. Hirst summarizes correctly, when he states that “the excitement and seriousness of HST's contribution to journalism hangs on one small word, but we still don't know where it came from. It's one of the enduring puzzles of 20th century literary and journalistic history” (7).

According to the book *Key Concepts of Journalism Studies*, gonzo journalism can be defined as “a style of journalism inextricably associated with the late American writer Hunter S. Thompson and more broadly with the New Journalism of the 1960s” that “features a bold, exaggerated, style of writing, which positions the author at the centre of the narrative” (Franklin 95). It is stated that a concise definition of gonzo journalism is impossible due the vastness of interpretations that have arisen over time, but the key element that distinguishes this specific style from others is explained as “the requirement for the gonzo journalist to write in the first person and to become the dominant participant in the narrative” (Franklin 96).

However, *gonzo* has mostly been connected to New Journalism and is sometimes even considered one of its sub-genres (see Hirst 3). According to Daniel Grubb, New Journalism incorporates a huge field of different styles and many labels have been applied to these styles – one of them is gonzo journalism, “of which Thompson is the best known – and possibly only – practitioner” (2). Nevertheless, Grubb avoids to simply labeling Thompson either New Journalist or *gonzo* – for being a New Journalist, HST participates too much in the action, and

the expression *gonzo* “carries an implied inferiority” since it “sounds unprepared, strung together, and madcap” (2). He bases these assumptions not only on his own observations, but moreover on Thompson's personal opinion – in an interview he once stated that he did not like to be labeled as *gonzo* because the expression was originally not from him (see Grubb 65).

Thompson's opinion about this label is difficult to distill from the few instances he talked about it. While Grubb presents HST's opposition to the term, other scholars highlight the fact that Thompson, nevertheless, accepted the term. Thompson even called *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* “a failed experiment” of gonzo journalism “because it violated one of the basic tenets of gonzo: no revision” (McKeen, *Thompson* 49). Thompson's rare attempts to define his work focus on the idea of writing without revision, claiming that his “idea was to buy a fat notebook and record the whole thing as it happened, then send in the notebook for publication – without editing” (HST qtd. in McKeen, *Thompson* 50). Moreover, he distinguishes himself from the New Journalists, calling Wolfe, as mentioned above, “too crusty to participate in his stories” and underlines that the idea was to write

– without editing. That way, I felt the eye and the mind of the journalist would be functioning as a camera.

...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 (HST qtd. in McKeen, *Thompson* 50).

One of the few definitions that have been offered for gonzo journalism is provided by William McKeen, who concludes that “gonzo requires virtually no re-writing, with the reporter and the quest for information as the focal point. Notes, snatches from other articles, transcribed interviews, verbatim telephone conversations, telegrams – these are all elements

of a piece of gonzo journalism” (McKeen, *Thompson* 36). This definition is consistent with most attempts to specify the key elements that make this genre so particular. What becomes clear is the fact that HST seemed to be the only true gonzo journalist and that it is the level of author participation, as well as the amount of editing that differentiates gonzo from any other style of writing.

It can be argued that the label gonzo journalism with its underlying negative connotation does not fully live up to Hunter Thompson's style. Due to this classification, his work mostly remains undervalued and is often scorned and dismissed by critics. In order to overcome this lack of appreciation, one has to provide further terms that might do justice to the author's particular style of writing.

1.4 Outlawed

Hunter S. Thompson frequently referred to himself as an outlaw writer, for example, in his autobiographical collection of texts *Kingdom of Fear*, he states that “it may be that every culture needs an Outlaw god of some kind and maybe this time around I'm it” (203). Some scholars also engage this assertion, mainly to position HST's work and argue that what he did was neither real New Journalism, nor gonzo journalism, but a wild style that did not adhere to any rules at all.

Porombka and Schmundt argue that “HST invented his role as journalistic outlaw while working on the Hell's Angels book” (241). But he dropped out of the gang at the end of the book in order to remain in this outlaw positing by not risking to become a member of any group (see Porombka and Schmundt 244). They assert that throughout his career Thompson cultivated this exile status by, for example, “not adhering to the establishment's production requirements”⁹ or “not obeying the directives through which one could become a greater and

⁹ My translation of: “sich nicht an die Produktionsvorgaben des Establishments zu halten”.

more famous journalist and celebrated writer”¹⁰ (244). Looking at Thompson’s very particular style and the nonchalance with which he encountered much of the criticism directed to his work can easily prove these arguments. In the early phases of his career, he showed eager enthusiasm to establish himself as a writer and become as famous as Scott F. Fitzgerald, but this ambitious approach to writing became less evident after the success of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Thompson no longer needed to work hard to become a great writer when he could actually “get away” with the style he used in his book.

William McKeen asserts HST’s role as a gonzo journalist, which for him “is by definition an outlaw journalist” (Interview with McKeen, Appendix A). For him, the writer engaged in a more traditional form of journalism because his writings resemble the 18th-century journalism of, for example, a James Boswell, who “was a *journalist* [emphasis added] in the sense that he was...keeping a journal, a public journal that he shared and that’s what Hunter Thompson did” (Interview with McKeen, Appendix A). He continues by calling Thompson “a pure journalist” whose stories were usually influenced by his emotions, not trying to omit his personal experience in specific situations (Interview with McKeen Appendix A). McKeen, similar to the scholars that have been mentioned above, also states that Thompson was much more involved in his stories to be put on a par with Tom Wolfe.

In their article, Porombka and Schmundt agree with the fact that HST cannot simply be mingled with the New Journalists because “one would not understand his role and his script if one compared him to the productivity of the great New Journalists or the conventional journalistic practice” (244).¹¹ They add that Thompson “does not have any ambitions to compete with the journalistic control freaks, who work on the side of the normal

¹⁰ My translation of: “nicht den Gesetzen zu folgen, durch die man ein noch größerer und noch berühmter Journalist und ein gefeierter Schriftsteller werden kann”.

¹¹ My translation of: “Doch würde man seine Rolle und sein Skript nicht ganz verstehen, wollte man ihn an der Produktivität der großen New Journalists oder der üblichen journalistischen Praxis messen”.

and the usual”¹² and define what the work of an outlaw actually is:

Maybe the outlaw is the secret central figure of New Journalism. And maybe he [HST] secretly occupies the leading role and the main script of the modern journalism, which individualizes one's way of observing and styles of writing and separates one's information processing from other systems of function and directives and rules of the society. Because the outlaw is a lawbreaker. He ignores the existing rules. He installs his own rules” (245 ff.).¹³

This opinion is supported by Daniel Grubb, who in the conclusion of his thesis *The Rhetoric and Role of Hunter S. Thompson* suggests that “outlaws have made a decision to break the rules” and that “Thompson's writing spits in the face of journalistic tradition and does so much more than the New Journalists” (65). With this assertion, he does not want to undervalue the innovative character of the New Journalists, but wants to highlight that Thompson has done much more in terms of ingenuity - “He went beyond New Journalism. He broke the rules of the rule breakers” (66).

It can be concluded that if one takes a closer look at Thompson's writings, it becomes evident that he cannot simply be categorized or labeled. While his work does share certain aspects of the New Journalistic style, it also breaks the genre's rules. Sometimes he wrote in a naturalist or realist fashion or set up a story similar to a tell tale but he never did so to the extent that it could be summarized in a specific category. Rather he seemed to apply techniques that he considered appropriate for his style. “The truth is”, Daniel Grubb states, “Thompson is all of these. More accurately, he uses all of these [techniques mentioned

¹² My translation of: “Ambitionen, sich mit den journalistischen Control-Freaks zu messen, die auf der Seite des Normalen und des Üblichen arbeiten, hat er nicht”.

¹³ My translation of: “Vielleicht ist der Outlaw die heimliche Zentralfigur des New Journalism. Und vielleicht kommt ihm die geheime Führungsrolle und das geheime Hauptskript im modernen Journalismus zu, der seine Beobachtungsformen und Schreibweisen verselbständigt und seine Informationsverarbeitungsprozesse weitgehend von anderen Funktionssystemen der Gesellschaft und ihre Vorgaben und Regeln abgekoppelt hat. Denn der Outlaw ist der Gesetzesbrecher. Er ignoriert die bestehenden Regeln. Er setzt die eigenen Regeln durch”.

above]” (64). By using all the narrative and journalistic techniques he liked and not sticking to the limitations of a single genre, he can be called an outlaw writer – someone who does not adhere to any formal directives or obey any stylistic rules.

1.5 Thompson's Fear and Loathing

Thompson's most famous story *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was first published in two parts in the issues 95 and 96 of the *Rolling Stone* magazine in November 1971. The reactions to the articles were unexpectedly positive – they attracted the attention of countless numbers of readers and fellow writers who praised his work as “an epochal sensation”.¹⁴

The story had evolved in the course of a different article about the assassination of the Mexican-American journalist Ruben Salazar in Los Angeles that Thompson had been assigned. In L.A., Thompson met Oscar Zeta Acosta, an Hispanic lawyer, whom he wanted to interview in order to gain insight to the local political Chicano scene. Nevertheless, it was difficult to discuss the Salazar murder in L.A. because Acosta's associates did not trust Thompson and never left him alone. Therefore, he asked Acosta to come with him to Las Vegas for a small assignment on the Mint 400 Race for *Sports Illustrated* to openly discuss the Salazar story. The article about the race he sent to the magazine was “aggressively rejected” and the editors refused to pay any expenses the journalist had acquired in Vegas (HST qtd. in McKeen, *Outlaw* 164). While working on the Salazar piece for *Rolling Stone*, he started writing a journal of his Las Vegas experience. The *Rolling Stone*'s editor, Jann Wenner, had the idea to send HST back to Vegas to cover the *National District Attorneys Association's Third Annual Institute on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs* that was being held at the Flamingo Hotel. For this opportunity, Acosta rejoined Thompson. After the convention, the journalist finished both the Salazar article, which was later published in

¹⁴ Taken from Tom Wolfe's review of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, back cover, special overseas edition, 1998.

Rolling Stone as *Strange Rumbblings in Aztlan*, but also the Las Vegas journal-like story that impressed his editor.

As mentioned above, HST later referred to *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as “a failed experiment” since he had violated the golden rule of gonzo journalism, which says that is no revision, or redrafting is allowed (HST qtd. in McKeen, *Thompson* 49). He admitted that he had been working hard on the piece, consciously shaping every sentence in order to keep up the immediate feel (see Hellmann 72). However, the text was something new or at least different from what was written at the time. With this account and its content, the author felt like he could fulfill the book contract on a book about “The Death of the American Dream” he had signed for Random House years before by subtitling the Vegas story *A Savage Journey Into the Heart of the American Dream*. Although Random House did not accept *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as fulfillment of the old contract, Thompson nevertheless portrayed the nation's dream in a very graphic and frightening way.

William McKeen notes that “Hunter's tale soon took on the nature of an epitaph on the 60s as the nation lurched through the Nixon era. It was a look back at the promise and hope of the 60s that had been stomped to death somewhere in the middle of 1968” (McKeen, *Outlaw* 174). But first, HST did not think of the article to be much more than a writing exercise, and in an interview with McKeen the journalist admitted that “the story came from his subconscious and that people saw more in it than he had put there” (McKeen, *Outlaw* 174). McKeen further suggests that “a lot of what we ascribe to *Fear and Loathing* was not intended. I think it was entirely accidental. I think it all came out of Hunter's subconscious” (see McKeen Interview, Appendix A). Nevertheless, Thompson managed to mirror the feelings of a time and a generation in his account, maybe not in an overtly descriptive manner as the essence is communicated between the lines. In an interview, McKeen mentioned that Thompson might not have consciously thought of writing about the American Dream when

he first arrived in Vegas, but “then later on consciously thought of it [Las Vegas] as representative of the vacuity of the American Dream...that there was nothing there. This whole city was fake” (see McKeen interview, Appendix A). One will never know if Thompson consciously intended the book to become a major statement about the end of the 60s and the American Dream or if he wrote whatever came to his mind while being in Las Vegas.

Due to Thompson's extreme lifestyle and the comparable youth of his work, he has not received much attention from academia. Only recently has Thompson been discussed in various publications by, for example, William McKeen and Max Stites and is taught at universities, mostly in journalism classes.

Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72 is a collection of the articles that was first published in the biweekly *Rolling Stone* magazine between December 1971 and December 1972, covering the presidential election. Straight Arrow Books published the articles in book form in 1973. The narrator of the articles is Dr. Hunter S. Thompson, who is not the author himself, but like Raoul Duke a persona that HST uses as an alter ego. Nevertheless, Dr. Hunter S. Thompson appears to be much closer to the “real HST” than Raoul Duke, who is much more like a comic figure.

The articles cover twelve months of political rallies, speeches and conventions, mainly from the Democratic Party primaries because early in the campaign Thompson decides to follow George McGovern and dismisses the other candidates for various reasons. The reports present HST's struggle to cope with deadlines and last minute articles that he faxes to the *Rolling Stone* headquarters in San Francisco where his editors have to assemble the loose paragraphs and scribbled notes. Although the writing style is similar to *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, including many exaggerations, fantastic episodes, insults and

humorous descriptions, *Campaign Trail* is more journalistic and factive than HST's most famous production. Frank Mankiewicz, the political director of the George McGovern's campaign, once called it "the least factive, but most accurate account" of the Campaign Trail 1972 (Mankiewicz qtd. in McKeen, *Outlaw* 194). Other journalists described it as "the best account yet published of what it feels like to be out there in the middle of the American political process" or "the best, the fastest, the most unorthodox account you'll read".¹⁵ The book's success made Thompson even more popular than he had already become after the publication of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and he acquired the status of a respected political commentator. Fellow journalists expressed their admiration for him inasmuch HST could write what he had in mind without really having to worry about people's reactions.

Since the book is a political account, there is no plot line like in a narration. HST focuses on the Democratic candidate George McGovern because he is the only politician in the campaign with whom Thompson can identify. The others, along with the American political system are denounced as corrupt and hopeless. The writer does not feel compelled to hide his hatred of Richard, who is scorned throughout the whole book. The articles also give insight into the process of a presidential campaign and the strain it puts on the journalists' nerves as Thompson describes the physical and mental difficulties he and his colleagues have to face in the course of the campaign. Nevertheless, Thompson does not associate himself much with the conventional journalists, who rather than writing insightful pieces about what they perceive, mainly answer the necessary five W-questions (see HST, *Campaign Trail* 92).

1.6 *Fear and Loathing versus Fear and Loathing*

It can be summarized that although both of Thompson's books are different in their essence, as *Vegas* can be labeled a semi-fictional narration of a journey to Las Vegas and as *Campaign*

¹⁵ Quotes taken from the cover pages of *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72*.

Trail is a collection of articles about the American presidential campaign, the books share many aspects that can be identified as trademarks of HST's writing style.¹⁶ Both texts feature, for example, exaggerated actual events, as well as purely fantastic parts that sometimes are difficult to identify as imaginary. The author adds transcripts of conversations, editor's notes and newspaper clips to his texts in order to contextualize his perceptions or highlight his ideas. Moreover, the language used is often obscene, contains vivid images and is soaked with black humor. Thompson uses a rather wild punctuation to support his lively style of reporting and sentences tend to be short and fragmented. In both books, malicious references to Richard Nixon are made and strong social criticism is uttered, partly in a subtle and partly in an overt fashion.

As discussed above, it is difficult to label Thompson's writing. The genre discussion of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* has been especially intense. Although various genre descriptions such as fable, roman à clé, journalistic novel and travelogue have been offered, there has never been any accordance on its classification. In a *New York Times* book review, Crawford Woods argues that "writing is as exact a label as the book will carry" because it is "neither novel or non-fiction", which is linked to the fact that "a new voice was demanded" in the wild 60s (Woods). It can be argued that the author combined diverse genres in his book, from fabulation over narrative report and vibrant fiction to social commentary. In this thesis, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* will be referred to as a semi-fictional narration as it represents a fictional description based on a true story.

Another basic different between *Vegas* and *Campaign Trail* concerns the narrators. Whereas *Vegas* is narrated by Raoul Duke and has a straight storyline, *Campaign Trail* is narrated by Dr. Hunter S. Thompson and is episodic in its structure. Compared to Dr. Thompson, who appears to consume fewer drugs, Raoul Duke is less reliable and cannot be

¹⁶ For reasons of brevity and fluidity of the text, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* will be referred to as *Vegas* and *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* as *Campaign Trail*.

trusted as he uses hallucinogenic drugs that alter his state-of-mind. These details should not be neglected as the drug use often affects the narration. Whereas Duke excessively indulges in various psychotropic substances and therefore suffers hallucinations and an altered consciousness, Dr. Hunter S. Thompson “only” consumes drugs that do not distort reality as much as hallucinogenics, for example, alcohol and amphetamines (see interview with McKeen, Appendix A; Hellmann 86).

In general, Thompson's writings can easily be identified and distinguished from other writers of the same period due to the multitude of reasons mentioned above. The focus of this thesis lies on the question how HST expressed his criticism of the American Dream in his work. The American Dream myth has always played an important role in American literature. Many famous writers, such as Scott F. Fitzgerald or Ernest Hemingway, have treated this myth in their writing. For American culture, the myth is essential and it has been developing and changing over times. Although no one has ever managed to fully explain and describe the American Dream, it has been a constant in the American discourse since the first settlers set their feet on the continent. However, to understand what the underlying concept of the dream involves and why it has been so important for American culture, one has to retrace it historically and analyze its effects on American society.

2. The Heart of the American Dream

In his work, Hunter S. Thompson repeatedly engaged the American Dream. He subtitled *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* “A Savage Journey to Heart of the American Dream”. Before writing this story, Thompson signed a contract for a book about the death of the American Dream. Unfortunately, he soon realized that the topic was too vast and manifold to discuss in a single, coherent non-fiction book. He then attempted to collect articles on specific topics that he considered linked to the American Dream but lacking focus and continuity he never managed to produce the book. Instead, he concentrated on *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, a manuscript that became his major statement on the nation's dream. The myth is an ever-present topic in American literature and history. Politicians, Americans and non-Americans use the expression to refer to a specific set of associations that cannot easily be summarized due to the multiple meanings. Its general meaning, however, seems to be known to and agreed on by most American citizens and a variety of key features of the American Dream can be identified.

2.1 Take this White Cadillac and Go Find the American Dream¹⁷

The American Dream is a very common and familiar term and its usage is not necessarily limited to the boundaries of the United States. Nevertheless, the U.S. appears to be “the only nation that prides itself upon a dream and gives its name to one” (Trilling qtd. in Fossum and Roth 5). But what is this dream about?

To some Americans, it signifies success, the accumulation of wealth, progress and social mobility. To others, the American Dream is nothing more than a cliché or a fantasy made-in Hollywood, the rags to riches story that has been exploited in different ways, for example, in literature or movies. However, there are also Americans that would describe the

¹⁷ Quote from HST, *Vegas* 165.

American Dream as a unique set of values and morals that differentiate America from the rest of the world. Yet, none of these definitions seem to be fully adequate or to give a precise idea of what the American Dream represents. Rather they consist of various terms and notions that are related to the concept of the American Dream. Although “the American Dream” is a frequently used term in everyday life, there seems to be no clear definition of what people mean when they actually refer to it. Some synonymously used expressions are: freedom, liberty, upward mobility, equality, individual success, independence, equal opportunity, materialism and individualism.

Jim Cullen points out that “its [the American dream's] definition is virtually taken for granted” (5). This implicitness makes it almost unnecessary for Americans to provide an appropriate definition, but the idiom functions as a generic term that incorporates other expressions. Hartmut Keil agrees with this and concludes that “the American Dream is a genus that allows various definitions, that likewise combines and includes different and mutually exclusive ideas. It proves to be a very vague term that can only be insufficiently described by synonyms” (5).¹⁸

Hence, the American Dream is not a single concept but rather comprises various ideas and ideals that can even be contradictory. As mentioned above, the term is recurrently used in many domains of life and it is clear that it principally refers to the United States. It has special significance since it was coined by an American in America. Therefore and due to its frequent usage, the American Dream has become a kind of national motto or key word (see Cullen 5). Cullen explains that it is “the most immediate component of American identity” and that “in the twenty-first century, the American Dream remains a major element of our national identity, and yet national identity is itself marked by a sense of uncertainty that may

¹⁸ My translation of: “es sich bei dem Begriff American Dream offenbar um einen Oberbegriff handelt, der die verschiedensten Deutungsmöglichkeiten zuläßt und absorbiert, der graduell unterschiedene und gegensätzliche Vorstellungen gleichermaßen vereint. Er erweist sich als ein sehr vager Begriff, der durch Synonyma nur ungenügend zu beschreiben ist”.

well be greater than ever before” - a statement which highlights the vagueness of the American Dream but also the national identity of which it is part (6). The American scholar Daniel Fyfe furthermore claims that “the myth of the American Dream shapes our vision of ourselves and of our country. It reaffirms a faith in the system. The American Dream is an ethos; and it is also the rhetoric of politicians: the myth is a moral force to be reckoned with, a credo for the masses ‘yearning to be free’” (8).

For many Americans, the *Declaration of Independence* constitutes a written definition of the American Dream since it expresses some aspects that are incorporated in the common idea about the dream. The most famous lines in the declaration are: “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”.¹⁹ These lines summarize a vision of America not only the Founding Fathers, but also the very first settlers who stepped onto to the new land had in mind: “that America is not only the home of the Dream but the Dream itself” (Adams qtd. in Fossum and Roth 6). America became a place and a dream in the minds of people who imagined it as the place to create a better society. However, the historian James Truslow Adams who named this vision “the American Dream” in his book *The Epic of America* in 1931, when he conceived it as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement” (Adams qtd. in Fossum and Roth 6). It would be unrepresentative to reduce this dream to a limited set of ideas that embrace a wide, often contradicting variety of concepts. Therefore, it is impossible to analyze and explain every single notion that constitutes the American Dream, but one can “identify its major strands and... how their recurrent interweavings have given it a subtle unity” (Fossum and Roth 6).

The American Dream essentially is a myth that is part of a certain mythology.

¹⁹ This quote is copyright by, and used with permission of, the Independence Hall Association, on the web at ushistory.org.

According to Richard Slotkin, mythology consists of

a complex of narratives that dramatizes the world vision and historical sense of a people or culture, reducing centuries of experience into a constellation of compelling metaphors. The narrative action of the myth-tale recapitulates that people's experience in their land, rehearses their visions of that experience in its relation to their gods and the cosmos, and reduces both experience and vision into a paradigm (6).

Considering this, it can be argued that the myth of the American Dream influences the American people inasmuch as it manifests itself in their worldview and some of their most basic beliefs. One can assume that the myth of the American Dream has become a crucial part of the American discourse. In the past, American scholars like Frederick Jackson Turner, as well as foreign travelers, who observed the American people like Alexis de Tocqueville, repeatedly discussed "the American character". Few other nations have been analyzed as frequently as the American has. Some scholars argue that this interest is linked to the American struggle to find an identity that differentiates "the American" from "the others" and that sets Americans apart from their colonial, hence European past. Therefore, many people have intended to interpret the "American mind" and find traits and trademarks that make the Americans so American. What they have found, on the one hand, are the stereotypes that are often associated with the inhabitants of the U.S., but also that the strong belief in the American Dream is one of the main characteristics of the American discourse. Therefore, an analysis of the myth of the American Dream gives also insights into American culture as one can argue that some of the ideals that can be identified as being linked to the American Dream have been developing and changing since the early colonial period and are still working today.

2.2 New Beginnings

One of the strongest aspects connected to the American Dream is the idea of new beginnings – the belief in the possibility of a fresh start. A general tendency towards optimism and hope for a better future, which is often perceived as typically American, also explains why a discourse such as the American Dream could establish itself in America. There might never have been any real consent on how the nation could reach this goal, but there is a general accord that progress is possible at all times.

This is mainly due to the historical development and the myth that has been created around America. Even before its actual discovery, people imagined a New Land, an Eden in the West, an El Dorado or a New Atlantis, and at the latest when Columbus set foot on this continent, America turned into a figurative paradise in people's minds (see Fossum and Roth 8). Yet it was only a vision of a continent and the reality the early settlers faced was different - they had to fight for survival in a rough, wild and unknown country. Many of these early colonists were Puritans, who seeking religious freedom, decided to head for the newly discovered continent where they could freely practice their religion and live without being forced to accept amoral sects and ruthless rulers. Furthermore, the European societies were undergoing a fundamental change - a shift from feudalism to early forms of capitalism was happening and deeply affected the European states. By moving to the New World, the settlers fled the societies they considered corrupt and established a place where they could rule without any interventions from others. It is clear that no one could join their community if she/he did not demonstrate sufficient religious and communitarian commitment. The community leaders showed no tolerance towards intruders and people who did not live according to their beliefs (including the “heathen” Native Americans) since they wanted to avoid the creation of a similar situation to the one in Europe. For them, the communitarian and religious commitment was a vital part of daily life in the New English colonies and this

factor turned out to be highly influential on the development of democratic governments in the 18th and 19th century based upon the notion of people's participation in government. The Puritans' sense of community was defined by strong emotional bonds between people who shared the same attitude towards life and expressed in certain beliefs and customs like regular town meetings in which everyone could express one's ideas and participate actively in the governmental process. Tocqueville discussed the remarkable equality he experienced in the U.S. in the early 19th century. In Europe, society was divided into classes and the government was in the hand of the aristocracy. In America, social classes developed later because most of the early settlers came from the same social background or were bonded by the collective quest for a new society (see Tocqueville).

Although the various colonies did not agree on most matters concerning government and religion, the general belief was that America was the place to “renew the world of mankind” (Edwards qtd. in Fossum and Roth 9). As mentioned before, this should be realized with a form of national governance that differed from the one in Europe that should be “an example for the rest of the world – a charge that America has taken seriously ever since” (Fossum and Roth 9). Fyfe even claims that “America has never had a problem seeing itself as destined for a special mission in the world; seeing itself, indeed, as the best hope of the “free world””(14). This (Puritan) mission is mirrored in the sermons of John Winthrop, the first governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony, whom Fyfe considers “a prototype of the American character” and who was the first to pronounce an American Dream aboard the *Arbella* in 1630 (16).²⁰

However, the Puritan vision of a new reformed society on the Northern American shores did not exactly eventuate as planned. Due to the vastness of the land, the settlers spread over a much bigger territory than the town and colony limits and therefore, some

²⁰ John Winthrop uttered the famous phrase “we shall be a city upon a hill” that has been frequently reused by American politicians and that, according to Fyfe, “marks the beginning of the American dream in American literature” (16).

people were left on their own devices. Furthermore, the possibility of obtaining one's own land, plus the danger of spreading diseases convinced settlers to leave the beaten track. Doubtless, some escaped the close-knit town communities by moving out of their reach (see Cullen 25). Not everyone seemed to share exactly the same dream of spiritual renewal and accept the imposed authorities, and once they had arrived on the American continent, this became more than obvious. Nevertheless, the immigrants shared the dream that America was the place to start from the beginning and establish a different life.

One could argue that the Puritans failed to build the perfect community due to the problems they had to handle, ranging from common human deficits, over the simple fight to survive in an unknown country, to controversies about intellectual and technical circumstances. Even so, after some years the Puritans had established themselves in colonies and started striving for a new goal. Since the land seemed infinite, an extension of their territory was a logical consequence. Therefore, they moved into Native American territory and fought terrible wars against the surrounding tribes. Fyfe explains that this aspect of early American history is often neglected as “it doesn't *look* [emphasis added] good” in the American history (23). He further argues that the Puritans felt that they had God on their side in the fight against the heathen Natives and this legalized the means by which they acquired more land.

The Puritans thought of themselves as to be God's chosen people, and that they were guided by the Lord himself. They were on a mission to establish a new society that adhered to God only and despised secular leaders. Their mission was to redeem humankind from all the failures of the past and live a truly Christian life in a society ruled by Christian values. Their idea about life based on the belief in hard work, determination and industry, and one had to be prepared to make sacrifices. This was the only way to succeed. To them, it was a sign of God's grace if one was successful in life. Success was said to be linked to a specific kind of

character. If someone did everything right but did not make any progress, it was blamed on a defect in that person's morality. Failure was blamed on one's character strength and therefore the system and authorities were not held responsible. People were left with the myth that everyone could be successful if she/he was courageous enough to do so. Since proceeding in life also meant adhering to the Christian moral principles that were considered right by the community, one had to play by the rules of society and the authorities. People who had different opinions about morality and society like, for example, John Morton were punished because it was God's will to respect the rules. Any alternative ideas about life and society were not accepted as they posed a threat to the established order and the dominant Puritan discourse.

At one point, the Puritans deviated from their initial ideals about life and a very basic notion of Puritanism was being reconsidered. This change was not only triggered by the Age of Enlightenment, but also by the vastness of the Northern American continent. Although some efforts were made to revive the original Puritan credo of not having any influence on one's destiny, for example, by Jonathan Edwards in the course of the First Great Awakening in the 1740s, the Puritan belief was veered towards a more moderate approach and many of them chose to be reasonable and accumulate wealth, for example, in form of land, as acceptable goals in life. This new belief in self-improvement through a virtuous, hard working life can still be witnessed in the American culture (see Cullen 30 ff.). Andrew Delbanco explains this development as a “deeply paradoxical faith that one the one hand had no use for what we would call human agency...you cannot chose the body in which you are born, or the mind with which you confront the world, or what will happen to you in this life...- and yet you are entirely responsible for your fate” (42ff.). This paradox has often been considered a basis of what has been referred to as “the American character” – the contradiction between the spiritual belief that hard work and perseverance will eventually

lead one to salvation, but that one nevertheless has no power over one's fate in the first place. One could claim that this duplicity caused confusion and frustration among the Puritans which manifested itself in violence that has been part of American history, for example, in the dreadful Indian wars, the witch trials in Salem or the rough fight for survival in a country that William Bradford called “a hideous and desolate wilderness, full of wild beasts and wild men – and what multitudes there might be of them they knew not” (Bradford 62). Fyfe even asserts that through the early wars with the Native American tribes “the myth of the American dream has fallen far from the heights of grace first sought by the Puritan settlers, yet an implicit ethos remained; revised by Thomas Jefferson, canonized by Abraham Lincoln and commercialized by Horatio Alger” (28 ff.). This fall from grace might also explain the deviation from the original Puritan credo.

Undoubtedly, it was the Puritan endeavor and their strong belief in themselves that inspired many people who came to America after them. They encouraged later generations of Americans to internalize certain moral values and commitment to the community. This morality, nevertheless, was a double-edged sword as the Puritans believed to be God's chosen people and therefore, had God on their side, no matter if they slaughtered Natives Americans to gain more land or punished free thinkers like Anne Hutchinson or Roger Williams, who did not live in conformity with what the authorities considered acceptable (see Fyfe 21 ff.).

The idyllic notions of the Puritan American Dream were later reapplied by Thomas Jefferson in the *Declaration of the Independence*, which has often been called the Charta of the American Dream (see Cullen 35). According to Fyfe, “the American Dream has always been a mainstream dream”, meaning that the people who played by the rules, who obeyed the authorities and lived after the moral assumptions could strive for the American Dream (37). This notion is also reflected in America's westward expansion (not only across the continent but even further) that has always been justified by moral stances that forced Americans to

expand and christianize Native people in the course of their mission.

2.3 The American Frontier and its Dream

No other development in American history reflects the American Dream of a new beginning and the Puritan mission more than the exploration of the American West. According to Frederick Jackson Turner, who presented his *Frontier Thesis* in 1893, the pushing forward of the frontier in search of land and fortune had been crucial for the evolution of an “American character” and simultaneously the American Dream. He argues that “the American social development has been continually beginning over again on the Frontier” and that “this perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities...furnish the forces dominating the American character” (Turner, *History* 38). With every mile that the frontier was pushed westwards and every new frontier that was established, a fresh start was made possible for the settlers and immigrants and it also signified “an escape from the bondage of the past; and freshness, and confidence, and scorn of older society” (Turner, *Frontier* 62). One should nevertheless bear in mind that the continent was not empty - according to Fyfe, “Jackson Turner acknowledged that each new frontier had been won by an Indian war” and the scholar also claims that the Americans stood united behind these wars as they were seen as acts of benevolence and part of the American mission to spread morality (79).

However, it is evident that this constant new beginning at the frontier and the life at these outposts provoked certain changes in American society and supported the evolution of what was later called “American individualism” as the settlers mainly traveled in small groups and had to fight for survival individually. Fossum and Roth affirm the importance of the frontier and assert that it was one of the main powers that made the emergence of the American Dream possible as every frontier represented a new beginning. This argument can

be supported by a large amount of literature that was inspired by the frontier and the particular American hero that came into life at the time, for example, Davy Crockett or Natty Bumppo, the hero of James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstockings* tales, who represented idealized versions of the lone frontiersman. Later the American Western movies, which Fossum and Roth call "that most indigenous of American popular arts", embraced this myth of the life at the frontier and the constant battles between the good and the evil, for example, the honest settlers versus the violent gunfighters (18).

The American Frontier has played an important role in the development of a myth about an "American character" - the freedom loving individualist - and that the pushing of a frontier implied innumerable possibilities and a new beginning which is, as mentioned above, one of the basic notions of the American Dream. After the complete exploration of the West by 1890, the dream of the frontier vanished because there was simply no frontier left. Nevertheless, the tangible frontier was later substituted by the exploration of space and an imaginary frontier, for example, boundaries that one could overcome by hard work and a strong belief in success. Fyfe also argues that business interests then became the new frontier to be pushed further and in order to expand American influence the Americans "claimed to be supporting the people's fervent desire for independence, but what we really wanted was trade, markets, their natural resources, their cheap labor" (78).

The importance of the westward expansion and the frontier should not be underestimated as it influenced both the American nation and helped the development of the idea of an American character. Nevertheless, with the growing territory, an efficient form of government had to be introduced, which became America's most valuable and later on probably most feared export good that for many represented both, the positive and negative sides of the American Dream.

2.4 Live, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness

The separation from the Mother country England through the American Revolutionary War (1775 – 1783) and *the Declaration of Independence* of 1776 constituted another new beginning for many Americans. Some historians even stated that the installation of the American Revolution was a new beginning for American history (see Fossum and Roth 10). Additionally, the notion of a fresh start was revived by the Romantic influence that literature and philosophy exercised at the time. “The American” not only differentiated her-/himself from “the European” but also perceived her-/himself more like a New Adam and America as the New Eden (see Fossum and Roth 10). Scott Douglas Gerber argues that the *Declaration of Independence* is “the founding document of the American regime” as it “speaks most fully to America as a nation- its origins, purposes, and ideals” (ix). The document has clearly been important throughout American history, as it has had a huge impact on American society – the ideas and the dream of a different society that it promotes have served as the cradle and line of argumentation for not only many of the following social movements emerging in the course of American history but also the “ordinary American Man” (Cullen 55 ff.).

As mentioned before, the declaration's notions of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness have always been very vague and open to a multiplicity of interpretations. Especially the definition of “liberty” has often been causing confusion among Americans. Franklin D. Roosevelt made an attempt to simplify the broad notion by diving it into the Four Freedoms that are also known as the birth rights of American citizens: the freedom of speech, the freedom of worship, freedom from want and freedom from fear (Cullen 57). The latter has been superseded by the freedom of enterprise, a notion that especially in the 20th century became one of the most dominant connotations of the American Dream. The *Declaration of Independence* and its ambiguity became the nation's bible of justifications for continually shifting standards because it is so open to interpretation. Nevertheless, Cullen argues that

while

it provides us with (often imperceptibly shifting) standards by which we measure success, [it] simultaneously calls attention to the gap between what is and what we believe should be, a gap that defines our national experience. A piece of wishful thinking composed in haste, the Declaration was born and lives as the charter of the American Dream (58).

This idea is also evoked by Fyfe that claims that “this [the content of the Declaration of Independence] is the ‘high road’ of the American narrative, the vision that has perpetuated the myth of the American Dream for so long” (46).

The thoughts expressed in the *Declaration of Independence* were later extended in the *Constitution of the United States* that manifested the Founding Fathers' political vision of checks and balances. Its goal has been to avoid that one political fraction gains too much power and installs a dictatorship or tyranny. Therefore, laws were stated that should preserve the liberty for which the former colonies had fought in the Revolution. Yet, they also wanted the people to take part in the governmental process and this created a tension between a popular vote and the laws expressed in the *Constitution* and the *Bill of Rights*. The question was how liberty, individual freedom and collective interest could be balanced, and according to Fossum and Roth, “Americans agree that liberty should not permit one person to trample on another and that justice requires limits on freedom” (12). This dilemma still deeply affects American society and the concept of the American Dream of personal freedom, since an accord on how to establish and keep such a balance is difficult to attain (see Fossum and Roth 12). Nevertheless, the *Constitution of the United States* can be interpreted as a written American Dream, the dream of unity, the dream of liberty and a new beginning as an united American nation in which Americans still have faith nowadays.

However, it should be noted that “the affirmation that early America was a democratic

‘land of opportunity’ is a figment of the American imagination” (Fyfe 44). Fyfe continues by pointing out that

There was no democracy in a land where African blacks were being enslaved by the millions, where ancestral Indian lands were being stolen, the natives destroyed; where poor whites were indentured in servitude: “rags to riches” was indeed a dream, a fantasy, for so many of those who were “present at the creation” of America's “constitutional republic” (44).

These aspects of American history tend to be denied in the dominant American historical discourse as the genocide of the Native peoples represents a dark side of the American Dream that does not include everyone.

2.5 The Dream of Social Mobility

In the 19th century, another American Dream came to live. The dream of self-realization can be found in diverse variations of which the most prominent undeniably is commercial success. The tale of the poor boy that tries his luck with nothing in his hands but courage and determination has ever been an American bestseller and the main idea of the American Dream of success and social mobility. Hunter Thompson frequently mentioned Horatio Alger's novels²¹ as the essence of these famous from rags to riches stories. These tales all imply the same basic idea: everyone, it does not matter how poor or baldly educated, can succeed in life if she/he is determined to do so.

One of the most famous examples in American history for social mobility is the story of Andrew Jackson who, born in poor circumstances, managed to become president of the United States in 1828. His determination to advance in life and his subsequent success were seen as a confirmation of the American Dream. He was not one of the old aristocrats but a

²¹ The Alger myth and its implications are discussed in greater details in section 2.5.

man convinced of himself and equipped with an unbreakable will to succeed. Because people could identify with a man coming from simple settings, he became a hero and model who personified the quintessence of the American Dream for the average people and the rise of the common man (see Cullen 69).

Nevertheless, his success demanded some sacrifices and one should note that Jackson's Indian policy, which included the Seminole wars and the dispatch of thousands of Native Americans, is usually not mentioned in the myth about the man. Howard Zinn asserts that "in American history you will find Jackson the frontiersman, soldier, democrat, man of the people – not Jackson the slaveholder, land speculator, executioner of dissident soldiers, exterminator of Indians (129). It should be mentioned that usually history is written by the winner and therefore, "the image and the cherished rhetoric remain firmly ingrained in the American psyche, while the reality of each situation is forgotten, languishing like restless specters on the dark side of the American mythos" (Fyfe 70). Jackson is often referred to as one of the most archetypal American characters of the U.S. and this might be right as his life story depicts the duality of American history, which has been mentioned earlier. On the one hand, he was as successful as any man could be, rose from humble backgrounds to the White House and was generally perceived as a good president. On the other hand, he was largely influenced by the rough-and-tumble frontier world, fought cruel wars against the British and Native American tribes and held slaves on his estate. He highlighted the importance of democracy, equality and morality, but at the same time had no moral conflicts with violence and exploiting people for his personal benefit. Daniel J. Fyfe asserts that Jackson is being given "the same paradoxical position as such eminent persons as Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin: the image and the cherished rhetoric remain firmly ingrained in the American psyche, while the reality of each situation is forgotten" (70).

In the mid 19th century, a completely new set of phrases and expressions entered the

American English language, which further triggered this new American self-perception. One of the most famous phrases is “self-made men”²², a phrase that is still used in the 21st century (see Cullen 69). Due to the opportunities that offered themselves at the time, also made possible by the Indian removal, Americans became more interested in the economic side of the American Dream and discussions about how to boost economy were being led by the government, which was divided in two parties: The Democrats, who consisted of Jackson and his followers that supported the Jeffersonian idea of “which governs best governs least” and did not want to mingle politics and economy, and the Whigs, who wanted to encourage the efforts of the government in economical matters (Cullen 73). These developments affected the North to a greater extent than the southern states, which were dependent on slavery to sustain the immense plantations, and it is clear that slavery did not flawlessly fit into the concept of the self-made man. Moreover, the opposition to slavery grew because people understood it as a menace to their dream of social uprising and as clashing with the ideals stated in the *Declaration of Independence*.

One man who profited from the ongoing difficulties was Abraham Lincoln, who according to Cullen was “as close as any American to actually being an authentically self-made man” (Cullen 74). He became the model of living the American Dream of social mobility, “the archetypal common man on the rise in America” because he, like Jackson, made it from modest backgrounds to one of the most influential presidents and through his assassination, he became a martyr (Fyfe 71). Lincoln was opposed to slavery –because to him, it constituted a threat to the American Dream as it contradicted the *Declaration of Independence* and his personal ideas of upward mobility.

Although he is often depicted as a martyr, Lincoln, like his predecessors and contemporaries, was “only” a politician and thought of slavery less in terms of opposing

²² This phrase used to be attributed to the statesman Henry Clay (see Cullen 73).

morality but threatening the country's stability. Hence, political and economical motives made him stand up for slavery's abolition, neither the suffering of the slaves, nor much of a moral stance. Like generally in history, situations and people tend to be mythologized as well as the exact circumstances often are neglected and simplified (see Fyfe 74).

Like Andrew Jackson, Lincoln revived the myth of the American Dream in several ways, for example, the dream of liberty and equality for all that was partly included in the Puritans' vision of a new beginning. In addition, the political leader was eager to support the basic idea(s) stated in the *Declaration of Independence* by claiming that it gave “liberty, not alone to the people of this country, but hope to the world for all future time” (Lincoln qtd. in Cullen 94). Although Lincoln became more desperate about his American Dream of upward mobility towards the end of his life, arguing that fate dictates our lives (similar to the original Puritan credo), the idea itself continued to live on in the belief that in America everybody could make it and live freely. As the future showed, this notion had a massive influence on America as it brought immigrants from all over the world, which tried their luck by pursuing their own American Dream. Fyfe concludes that “the myth of the American Dream supposes success and reward through the practice of hard work, industry, perseverance and virtue. Lincoln is an emblem of this ethic, and he has been absorbed into the myth of the American dream” (74). Soon the myth was used in literature and poor boys, who lived the American Dream, became heroes for the masses.

2.6 I'm Bad but I Don't Care, Boys, Gonna Be a Millionaire²³

Horatio Alger's stories engage the central ideas of the American Dream: that through hard work and perseverance one can make it in the US. Horatio Alger was a minister, who, after being accused of pedophilia fled to the anonymity of New York, wrote mediocre stories

²³ Lyrics taken from the song “Millionaire”, written by Laurie Lewis and Tom Rozum in 1995, covered by Pascal Briggs in 2009.

about poor young boys that ascended socially by “facing down adversity with moralism and plucky strength of character” (Fyfe 75). His novels have appealed to the masses because they “commercialize in second-rate fiction the ethos and the myth of the American Dream” and provide the reader with some sort of manual for the achievement of the dream (Fyfe 75). Alger’s fictional stories became highly popular, as especially in the time he published his narratives, success seemed possible due to the economical progress the nation witnessed. Alger’s stories reinforced the belief in the Puritanical ethos of “industry and morality” that will eventually lead to success – a basic credo that has been implemented into the American discourse over time.

However, the worldview presented in Alger’s stories has flaws as it ignores factors like gender, race, class background, national origin and sexual behavior that determine our social position and can not be claimed to be inexistent (see Dalton 1). In his book that focuses mostly on racial problems in American society, Harlon L. Dalton argues that “there is a fundamental tension between the promise of opportunity enshrined in the Alger myth and the realities of a racial caste system” (3). The American law professor explains that although the Alger myth is conflicting with the American realities, the myth can nevertheless live alongside the reality. However, “confronting that reality is made that much harder by a mythology that assures us we can have it all” (4). Dalton’s observations underline the proposition that the myth and the reality clash, but still coexist. Due to the popularity of Alger’s work, the myth of the American Dream is an important strand of American discourse.

Hunter S. Thompson understood the importance of the Alger myth in American society and for the American Dream as he frequently referred to it in his work about 70 years after Alger’s death. It was a time where the gap between the myth, to which so many clung, and the violent reality by which they were surrounded was immense. The counterculture thought they could change society from profit-oriented mass consumers back to

Franklinesque individualists who were “doing well by doing good”. It became their American Dream to alter what has been labeled the “American way of life”.

2.7 Transcending the American Dream

As mentioned in Chapter One, the time of the 1960s was marked by political upheaval and a craving for change, not only for the American Civil Rights Movement but also students, anti-war protestors or people who felt that the time was ripe for a revolution. This feeling was mirrored in the numerous pieces of literature which the Beat poets had written in the 1950s, for example, *Naked Lunch* by William S. Burroughs, *Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac or the poetry of Allen Ginsburg and that mainly circulated on university campuses and spread ideas about alternative ways of living and thinking among students.

The American Transcendentalists of the 19th century and Eastern philosophies like Buddhism and Zen had influenced the Beats. The Transcendentalists were a group of thinkers and writers that promoted the basic decency of the human being, the idea that experience is the only goal worth striving for and who dreamed of “a benign spiritual democracy in which the conflict between the freedom of the individual and the welfare of the collective were reconciled in an Oversoul which included everyone” (Fossum and Roth 14ff.). To Kerouac and Ginsberg, the America of the 1950s had become a place lacking freedom and experiences because early marriage and careers did not correlate with their worldview. In his major novel *On the Road*, Kerouac promotes individuality and freedom through a hero who rather than wanting a career, is searching for freedom on the American streets.

The Beats’ interest in Eastern philosophies later had a large influence on the counterculture's strong leaning to foreign spiritual theories. Their “Dharma Bums”²⁴, “their rejection of American materialism, their embrace of an open sexuality...their respect for the

²⁴ This is the name of the novel *The Dharma Bums* by Jack Kerouac published in 1958 which depicts two heroes, the dharma bums, struggling with their experiences and their worldviews that is largely influenced by Buddhism.

land” were ideas that were supported by the younger generation of hippies and freaks that emerged in the 60s and to some extent, also by Hunter S. Thompson (Farber 172). For some time, the poets offered their wisdom to the freedom seeking countercultural youth but they soon realized that the hippies did not exactly represent the society they imagined. For many hippies and their leaders, swallowing LSD could trigger spiritual awakening and societal change.

The importance of the Vietnam War in American history and especially for the 1960s cannot be neglected. Vietnam was the first war that the American nation did not win and for a nation of “winners”, losing was simply not acceptable. It left scars on the nation’s memory. Fyfe claims that the defeat in Vietnam brought to light “that the ‘means’ employed toward our ‘democratic’ ends were unchristian, immoral, murderous, inept and second-rate. America was revealed a paranoid giant, terrified of a communist encroachment it couldn't see” (86). For some people, “Vietnam was the place where the myth of the American dream was seriously debunked” (Fyfe 87). To the countercultural and the anti-war movement, the war symbolized all that was wrong in American society – the violence, the ignorance, the fake morality and the duality that they perceived as detrimental factors present in American society. By protesting and promoting their ideas, they tried to make the public aware of the fact that something was wrong with America. Before the My Lai massacre, the assassination of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King and the National Democratic Convention in 1968, a change seemed possible. The general atmosphere among hippies, freaks, students and general protestors was one of change, a fresh start, and people hoped that the original American Dream of creating a new society could be revived. Hunter S. Thompson described this special mood of the time before 1968 in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as follows:

You could strike sparks everywhere. 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 (68).

The counterculture saw the need to address the problems the public did not want to see. To the public, the Vietnam War, the societal inequalities and economic difficulties the nation had to face were all products of the spreading communism and the rebelling youth that did not appreciate what their parents had established through hard work and commitment. The general discourse was that everything was going well in America, that there were no real problems and that the counterculture, African Americans, women, students, and so forth, were rebelling for no obvious reasons or were simply morally corrupt. The countercultural discourse, on the other hand, highlighted the unjustness and brutality of the Vietnam War and the racism that was an accepted part of society, as well as the materialism that had turned society into a community of heartless egoists and the culture of abundance that had developed over the prosperous years. In the 1960s, the large gap between the idealized content of the written documents such as the *Declaration of Independence* and the *Constitution*, the myth of the American Dream and the realities in the U.S. was demystified and became painfully evident. In an article of 1968, the year the counterculture turned sour, Thompson recounts this gap and the rising violence as follows:

...a generation that saw itself as doomed and useless in terms of the status-quo, business-as-usual kind of atmosphere that prevailed in this country as the war in Vietnam went from bad to worse and the United States, in the eyes of the whole world's "under thirty generation", seemed to be drifting toward a stance of vengeful, uncontrolled militarism (*America* 6).

The counterculture wanted to awaken the public and redirect society towards a different approach to life. Although they managed to convince many people to promote the new points of view, the drugs and excesses displayed in the media ruined their efforts and the events in 1968, for example, the violence at the Altamont Speedway Free Festival or the National Democratic convention, the assassination of Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, and so forth, led to a sudden rupture of the counterculture. People understood that the clash of perceptions between the older and younger generations was insurmountable and eventually many of the counterculture's followers simply gave up. Hunter S. Thompson noticed this downturn and describes the disappointment many of the countercultural heads felt in the early 70s: "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" (*Vegas* 68).

One person that became the symbol of the nation's failure in the late 60s was Richard Nixon, the twice elected president who did not only order the bombing of Cambodia but was also proven to be a criminal in the course of the Watergate scandal that made him resign from office. According to Fyfe, Nixon is "a skeleton in the American closet" and "a prominent symbol of the failure of that [American] dream, the living proof of its falsity" (92). Nixon's image was perfect, he appeared to be a just and good president, but in the end, he had been involved in "dirty" business. To the counterculture, Nixon stood exactly for what was wrong with the nation as he epitomized both the bright and the dark side of the American Dream—the perfect image he and his media wizards had created (myth) and the illegal, violent actions like the bombing of Cambodia and the Watergate affair (reality). This is probably the reason why Thompson detested the president so much and felt no need to hide his emotions in his publications.

HST was definitely part of the 1960s counterculture. Nevertheless, it can be claimed

that he shared more with the Beat poets than the young hippies did. First, he belonged to an older generation than the 1960s youth and had experienced long journeys through the U.S. and South America, as did the Beats and their literary characters. Furthermore, his basic beliefs were similar to the ones the Beats promoted. Interestingly enough, these viewpoints were not incredibly new, different or diverging from what can be called the “traditional American discourse”. In fact, the Beat generation and Thompson “tended to appeal to what they identified as genuine ‘American values’, such as individual freedom of choice, as alternatives to a corporate capitalism that they perceived to be corrupting American ideals” (Gair 26). Thompson explained the discrepancy between the countercultural and hegemonic discourse as follows:

The hippies threatened the establishment by dis-inter-ring some of the most basic and original “American values”, and trying to apply them to life in a sprawling, high-pressure technocracy that has come a long way, in nearly 200 years, from the simple agrarian values that prevailed at the time of the Boston Tea Party. The hippies are a menace in the form of an anachronism, a noisy reminder of values gone sour and warped...of the painful contradictions in a society conceived as a monument to “human freedom” and “individual rights”, a nation in which all men are supposedly “created free and equal” (*America* 7).

By 1968, the counterculture had been radicalized, violence and riots were restrained by police forces and it came to escalations like at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago where the police clubbed HST among many protestors. For many, America had turned into a warfare state that did not only fight protesting people at home but also foreign regimes overseas. Especially for Thompson, the United States had lost contact with the nations' basic moral values. He felt that the country's inhabitants had become too superficial, too focused

on power and success for which the individual freedom of citizens was being restricted. Although the wave of the 1960s counterculture broke at the end of the decade, Thompson never stopped criticizing his nation for losing touch with the most basic American values and giving up the original American Dream of freedom for the fake reality of power and wealth.

According to Cullen, it is the works of art that have been most successful in capturing the essence of the American Dream and also its nightmare (180ff.) Fyfe agrees and claims that “though the dream is perpetuated from generation to generation, America's writers continue to expose the sordid realities that fester beneath the gilded facade of myth” (98). One of the most famous examples is Scott F. Fitzgerald's novel *The Great Gatsby* that, published in 1925, catches some important notions of the American Dream. In their works, younger authors such as Hunter S. Thompson or Joan Didion discuss American society, the American Dream and the realities, and revisited the national myth in a distinct time in American history through their heroes, who often lose their faith in the dream (see Fyfe 3).

Due to the historically shaped assumption that America is the place where everyone can succeed, where people can start over again and have a better future, the American Dream has become such a hope shedding national myth. The heart of this dream is hope, hope for a better future, for a fresh start and freedom from restrictions and limits. Eventually, the American Dream is not more than a common goal, a common hope, a shared narrative that has bonded people and helped to overcome many difficulties through the shared belief in this myth (see Cullen 189). Clearly, it has been misused and mystified by people, who have pretended that the American society is an equal society, and Hollywood, which has glorified the dream in its productions. Although its attraction is fluctuating and its importance diminished in, for example, the late 1960s and 70s, there have been times in which it has been very prominent and vital to American society. In the current situation in America, with the first African American president in history and an immense economical crisis that affects not

only the United States, the hope for a better future, the hope of renewal and change of the actual circumstances, in short - the American Dream - has been revived and might inspire many people to pursue their visions. Nevertheless, not only the literary, but also the historical evidence should raise the awareness that the American Dream is only a powerful national narrative that has evolved around and with American culture.

In Hunter S. Thompson's work, the myth of the American Dream is ever-present – represented through symbols and characters, he celebrates and criticizes the dream. His characters are “common American men” that strive for the dream, but are also appalled by the corrupt society, as well as their own immoral behavior that they witness in the course of their mission. Fueled by Horatio Alger's stories and convinced that they have enough courage, his protagonists do their best to achieve success. Sometimes, they even forget about their most basic values as they are gripped by the hunger to succeed. However, the realities they are facing do not correspond with their vision of the dream – they seem not to be the only ones that forget about moral obligations and Christian values in the course of the quest for the dream. HST's characters depict, participate in and are appalled by a society that is fixed upon the fulfilled of the dream. His particular writing and composition style helped him to paint a vivid picture of American society in 60s and 70s. Thompson showed how large the gap between the dream and the reality really is. In the following chapters of this thesis, Thompson's society and its struggles with the dream, as portrayed in *Vegas* and *Campaign Trail*, will be analyzed.

3. Fear and Loathing: When Puritan Minds search the Dream at the Frontier

The idea of the American Dream and its revelation as a hollow myth is a recurrent theme in American literature since the early settlers. According to Fyfe, “the Anglo-American literature is a trail of tears” as “the myth of the American dream is the promise of America, but it is a promise betrayed” - a notion which is reflected in many of the country's finest literary works from Hawthorne to Fitzgerald to Hunter S. Thompson (112). The heroes depicted in their works believe in the power of the American Dream but eventually they have to realize that the gap between myth and reality is insurmountable. Some of them lose their lives in their quest for the dream, for example, Jay Gatsby. Others, such as Raoul Duke, turn into monsters in order to cope with the grim world that surrounds them.

As an American journalist, who had been influenced by great American writers like Fitzgerald or Hemingway, Hunter Thompson could not help but continue the tradition and evoke the American Dream in his work. He rarely does so in an overt or explicit manner but rather depicts America and its national myth in a hidden and metaphorical way. The places and characters Raoul Duke and Dr. Thompson, HST's narrators, encounter on their way, add more subtlety to the perception of the American nation in the 1970s. Although one could discuss whether HST intentionally planned all the details one can interpret as linked to the American Dream, his works nevertheless provide us a detailed description of American society in a very stirring time. (see interview with William McKeen, Appendix A)

3.1 Symbolic Landscapes

One of the recurring themes in Thompson's work is a remote place that resembles a frontier. His characters travel extensively over the American territory, on several

occasions eastwards, for example, from Los Angeles to Las Vegas or from Colorado to Washington D.C. This constitutes an inversion of the historical westward expansion that has been identified as an important historical aspect of American history (see Fyfe 79; Fossum and Roth 17ff.). Thompson also engages the frontier myth in his works and frequently refers to it.

In *Campaign Trail*, the narrator, Dr. Thompson, explains what going East triggers in him: "One of the best and most beneficial things about coming East now and then is that it tends to provoke a powerful understanding of the "Westward Movement" in U.S. history. After a few years on the Coast or even in Colorado you tend to forget just exactly what it was that put you on the road, going west, in the first place" (23). It seems as if going to Washington D.C. in order to cover the presidential campaign reminds him of his motives to move to Colorado, as he perceives the city as "an armed camp" and lives in "a condition of constant fear" (24). Washington D.C., the governmental heart of the US, appears to be frontier-like: the police and military protection in the city remind Dr. Thompson of how it must have felt on the lonely frontier outposts where the settlers carried guns and where afraid of attacks by wild animals or Native American tribes. For the narrator, who had been living near the West Coast for a long time, going East seems to be as menacing as going west must have felt for the early pioneers who moved across the land.

Raoul Duke also travels eastwards from Los Angeles through the desert to Las Vegas, an isolated settlement in a geographically extreme position that reflects its "status as embodiment[s] of the Dream of a fresh start associated with the American frontier as the site of isolation and removal from civilization" (Stites 79). Las Vegas bears symbolical significance as for Duke it is more than America's most renowned Sin City. On the first page of *Vegas*, the characters are heading through the desert to Las

Vegas, at a hundred miles an hour in a rented red convertible. The narrator emphasizes the distance of Vegas by pointing out that he and his attorney are “at the edge of the desert” and still need to drive about a hundred miles at top speed to reach their destination (3). The first description of Vegas also underlines its remoteness: “Las Vegas was just up ahead. I could see the strip/hotel skyline looming up through the blue desert ground-haze: The Sahara, the landmark, the Americana and the ominous Thunderbird – a cluster of grey rectangles *in the distance* [emphasis added], rising out of the cactus” (22). The city is separated from the rest of America by the surrounding desert, its spiky fauna and the mist, which appears to hang thickly over the city as if it was hiding its reality. Las Vegas is a frontier, a wilderness, to which the characters can escape²⁵ and look for the American Dream. They know that the frontier offers opportunities. Nevertheless, this city does not seem to be “particularly fertile for sowing the seeds of a new, prosperous life, at least not for the masses”, an assertion that is supported by HST's further depiction of the city (Stites 80).

The concept of the frontier also implies the possibility of a fresh start, a new beginning on uninhabited land where the opportunities appear to be innumerable. Frederick Jackson Turner argued that “since the days when the fleet of Columbus sailed into the waters of the New World, America has been another name for opportunity” (Turner, *Frontier* 61). Due to the westward expansion, these opportunities were renewed with every new frontier and many profited from these chances. Duke and his attorney drive to Vegas not only to write about the Mint 400 race but also to find the American Dream at this frontier: “But what *was* the story?? Nobody had bothered to say. So we would have to drum it up on our own. Free Enterprise. The American Dream. Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs in Las Vegas. Do it *now*: pure Gonzo

²⁵ Duke explains that “every now and then when your life gets complicated and the weasels start closing in, the only real cure is to load up on heinous chemicals and then drive like a bastard from Hollywood to Las Vegas” (12). Therefore, it appears as if the characters were escaping.

journalism” (12). In this quote, the narrator summarizes the American Dream in the cliché connotation of free enterprise – for many Americans, not only the frontier, but the whole American country has always been the place of endless opportunities as there seemed to be few restrictions on how to make profit, for example, by speculating on land, trade, construction, resources, and so forth. For Duke, the journey to Vegas could prove to be an unexpected possibility to live the American Dream. He had been assigned to go there, had been given cash, had rented a large car with full insurance coverage and similarly to the heroes in Alger's novels, with a bit of luck (and plenty of drugs) he might find the American Dream in the desert city (see Fyfe 247).

It soon becomes clear that the main opportunity in Vegas is quick profit through gambling: “The madness goes on and on, but nobody seems to notice. The gambling action runs twenty four hours a day on the main floor, and the circus never ends” (46). Duke's observations approve that Las Vegas epitomizes the American Dream as it sells the possibility of a new beginning through gambling and betting.

3.1.1 Roll the Dice and Never Think Twice

Gambling and the vision of accumulating wealth fast and quasi effortlessly is another key aspect of the American Dream since profit allows one to start a new life. There is no other place in the world that is more often associated with gambling than Las Vegas. Some scholars argue that historically seen, gambling has had a huge effect on American society, as it was a vital part of the frontier life. The dream of making it effortlessly by the means of gambling went hand in hand with the extension of the American territory: “Like bettors, pioneers have repeatedly grasped at the chance to get something for nothing – to claim free land, to pick up nuggets of gold, to speculate on western real estate” (Findlay 4). The historian John M. Findlay proceeds by saying that “the dogged

pursuit of success, on the frontier or the betting tables, looms larger than success and failure itself” and underlines the fact that the Americans enjoyed taking risks, if not by exploring unmapped territories then by betting and gambling (4). Heavy gamblers were not welcome in the eastern colonies or the South and faced prosecution or even lynching, so that gambling eventually moved to and became associated with the Far West and the frontier (see Findlay 4). In addition, with the establishment of mines in Nevada and the Gold Rush in California, gambling gained even more popularity. Nowadays, it is a significant part of American leisure activities.

Although Americans gamble all over the U.S., Las Vegas is the place with the highest concentration of casinos. Ironically, the Mormons were the first to arrive in Nevada and built a fort and a church in order to civilize the Paiute Indians but gave up in 1858. Later, the city became a train stop on the way between Salt Lake City and Los Angeles and the construction of the nearby Hoover Dam brought the first workers to the desolate area. Money was then brought to town through the neighboring military basis, but the government still had to financially support the poor region. Although it took until about 1945 for gambling, prostitution and drinking to outdo the famous Hoover Dam as main tourist attraction, the general interest in making a profit with games and entertainment constantly grew (see Cullen 165). Prostitution and gambling were eventually legalized in 1931 because due to the Depression, the government lacked money and from that point onward, this type of entertainment has been the city's main source of income (see Cullen 165). Not only did it bring crowds of immigrants who tried their luck in the gambling town but also the organized crime. The gangsters, who came mainly from the east, arrived with their own idea of the American Dream and it was much easier to achieve it in the crime-friendly atmosphere of Las Vegas. Therefore, Vegas soon became an American playground, a place where the

effortless American Dream of profit was intensely promoted. Therefore, it becomes evident why Thompson thought Las Vegas was a perfect setting for his story because the city still has a special status in the “American mind” as the place where almost everything is allowed and where the American Dream appears to be tangible. Raoul Duke detects this strong presence of the myth of the American Dream in the city when he describes the number of gamblers trying their luck:

Who *are* these people? These faces! Where do they come from? They look like caricatures of used-car dealers from Dallas. But they're *real*. And, sweet Jesus, there are a hell of a *lot* of them – still screaming around these desert-city crap tables at four-thirty on a Saturday morning. Still humping the American Dream, that vision of the Big Winner somehow emerging from the last-minute pre-dawn chaos of a stale Vegas casino. Big strike in Silver City. Beat the dealer and go home rich (57).

He is puzzled by the number of gamblers who try to live the American Dream and do not give up the hope of getting rich effortlessly by gaming (see Stites 92). Nevertheless, his description lacks any kind of faith in the actual possibility of winning – Duke questions the fact that so many people hope to win and keep on looking for the American Dream, which again reflects the attraction of the myth. Although he has understood that it is a myth, he cannot help but gamble himself: “I stopped at the Money Wheel and dropped a dollar on Thomas Jefferson – a \$2 bill, the straight Freak ticket, thinking as always that some idle instinct bet might carry the whole thing off (57).

Duke cannot resist the temptation of gambling and one could argue that he does not totally deny the possibility to succeed in Las Vegas, although reason tells him that he is unlikely to go home rich. Like a true “American Adam”, who sees an opportunity for

progress, he spends two dollars on a quick bet.

The two-dollar note he uses also carries symbolic significance, as it is a very rare bill that contains a picture of Thomas Jefferson, the principal drafter of *the Declaration of Independence*, who promoted individualism and the importance of freedom among Americans. Due to its rarity, the two dollar note is often considered a “lucky bill” and Duke calls it “the straight Freak ticket” - first of all, because the bill has repeatedly caused confusion as it is so rare that it has sometimes been considered a counterfeit, and secondly, because of its outstanding place among American legal tender, the note itself could be called a “freak”. The word “freak” also implies the social position of Duke who, as part of the drug culture, calls himself a freak and by that, distances himself from the general public. Despite this detachment, he obviously is a part of the American Masses that are present in Vegas, as he cannot suppress his urge to seize the chance at the gambling tables. The character acknowledges that there might be some instinct that causes him to try his luck. As mentioned above, this attitude can be related to the (cliché) stories of the frontiersmen who went westwards, often only led by their instincts, to try their luck in the wilderness. Like a true frontiersman, Duke follows his instincts. And like most gamblers in Vegas, he loses.

Early in the book, the narrator clarifies that Las Vegas does not have to offer much more than the idea of instant wealth. Max Stites argues that “in fact it seems to be the only thing on offer and that offer is made in gaudy, neon-lit terms that physically reflect the crude yet flashy rhetoric of the American Dream” (94). Las Vegas was and still is a highly artificial place, not only its foundations, that were build in the desert where otherwise nothing would grow, but for Duke, also most people are fake. It is a plastic neon world that gives you the impression to be in Venice, Paris or Cairo and that makes it even easier to believe in the American Dream because some American

businessmen have managed to built a colorful oasis in the desert that makes them rich - they made the impossible look possible, they lived the American Dream. This vision overshadows the city and most people who arrive there believe that it is possible to come back from the desert as a winner, like some frontiersmen returned from the wilderness as established men. However, a new beginning always comes at a price.

3.2 Primitive Christian Instincts

The Puritan ethos can still be witnessed in American society today. In the past, it has been argued that Americans in general believe in Christian moral values and that hard work and determination will eventually lead to success. Most U.S. citizens agree with the idea that one lacks strength of character or perseverance if she/he does not succeed in life. The notion “everybody can make it” is still taken at face value by a majority of people in America. Moreover, failure and lack of success are often attributed to a moral defect and are considered something dreadful.

In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, this spirit is mirrored in various ways. In the beginning of their mission, Raoul Duke, like John Winthrop aboard the *Arbella*, explains their motivations: “But our trip was different. It was a classic affirmation of everything right and true and decent in the national character. It was a gross, physical salute to the fantastic *possibilities* of life in this country – but only for those with true grit. And we were chock full of that” (18). This justification or explanation of Duke's trip also reflects that fact that the Puritan spirit is still present in American society as he reaffirms the idea that the people with strength of character can only seize opportunities. The same is also true for the American Dream that, according to Alger's stories, can only be achieved by the one's with the right pluck. Like the Puritans, Duke and his attorney consider themselves the right people to try their luck in Las Vegas.

In *Campaign Trail*, Dr. Thompson has a similar experience when he reassures himself why he is going to Washington D.C. Dr. Thompson acknowledges that he is “going to Washington to cover the presidential campaign for the *Rolling Stone*”, which for him is “a weird sort of trip”, and he argues that he wants “to at least *try* this trip” (30ff.). His listeners do not understand it and ask Thompson “Why would *anybody* want to get hung up in a pile of shit like Politics?” (31). Dr. Thompson highlights the necessity of his mission move to the capital to cover the campaign, as it is the first steady job for Thompson in a long time. It is his chance to start into a fresh, though insecure life. Before that, Dr. Thompson shows his insecurity and determination to get on this mission: “I was half-mad on PCP and eager to fill my empty Wild Turkey jug with enough fresh blood to make the last leg of the trip into Washington and apply for White House credentials...nothing like a big hit of red corpuscles to give a man the right lift for a rush into politics” (29). He depicts himself as a mad man who, despite of the shallow possibility to actually obtain White House credentials, is strong-willed to get what he wants because his quest demands pluck. Like the Puritans, of whom many died in the course of their journey to America, the narrator is convinced of his goals. His ideas are presented in a symbolical way, using the image of the cup that is filled with Jesus' blood at the Last Supper, to underline or distort the Christian values by which his actions are inspired.

Similar to the Puritans, the characters in both of Thompson's books are guided by humanitarian ideals, for example, when Dr. Thompson stops on his way to Washington because he had seen something at the roadside. He makes sure not to be unprotected and brings along his .357 magnum: “No point in getting stomped & fucked over, I thought – by wild beasts or anything else. My instincts were *purely humanitarian* [emphasis added] - but what about that Thing I was going back to look

for? ...blood-crazed dope fiends who crouch beside the highway and prey on innocent travelers” (*Campaign* 28). By evoking the image of “wild beasts” that attack “innocent travelers”, one is reminded of the settlers that moved west and were attacked by not only wild animals but also Native American tribes. These settlers did not perceive themselves as menacing whereas they might have been for the tribes who were living on the territory on which the pioneers wanted to settle. Dr. Thompson protects himself, as his good intentions might not matter to wild beasts.

Raoul Duke's Christian values are discovered to be insincere because his actions diverge from his thoughts and at some point he feels guilty for what he had committed so far and addresses the Lord: “Jesus Creeping God! Is there a priest in this tavern? I want to confess! I'm a fucking *sinner*! Venal, mortal, carnal, major, minor – however you want to call it, Lord...I'm guilty” (*Vegas* 86). Like the Puritans, Duke has to deal with his fall from grace in Las Vegas. The Puritans committed unspeakable crimes in the Indians Wars that definitely opposed their Christian values. And similar to them, who excused their actions as being sanctified by God, Duke blames his deeds on the Lord and argues that it was the obedience of Christian morality that brought him into this situation: “Which is not really a hell of a lot to ask, Lord, because the final incredible truth is that I am not guilty. All I did was take your gibberish *seriously*...and you see where it got me? My primitive Christian values have made me a criminal” (86 ff.). The denial of his guilt by blaming God for the crimes he committed is intensified when he tells himself that “This [his actions] is merely a necessary expedient, to avoid a nasty scene” (87). Obviously, the goal justifies the means, and parallels can be drawn to the Puritans who, in order to fulfill their mission of creating a Christian society the world had never seen before, killed Native Americans in order to extend and protect their territory (see Fyfe 23).

The narrator resumes his prayer by insulting and threatening the Lord: “You evil bastard! This is *your* work! You'd better take care of me, Lord...because if you don't you're going to have me *on your hands*” (87). Duke rejects guilt. He blames his crimes and immoral behavior on God. He sees the gap between the myth of morality and the reality of what he did. He is aware of what he did, but does not want to acknowledge that he committed his deeds self-consciously. It is easier and less painful for him to blame his misbehavior on God than stand up for himself.

The underlying Christian symbols and values that Duke perceives on his trip to Las Vegas are presented in an indirect way, for example, when Duke watches the news on TV after the consumption of Adrenochrome: “Nixon's face filled the screen, but his speech was hopelessly garbled. The only word I could make out was “sacrifice”. Over and over again: “Sacrifice...sacrifice...sacrifice...”” (134). The narrator recounts that he was able to see Nixon on the screen but did not clearly understand what the President was saying. This implies Duke's state-of-mind, but it could also indicate that he cannot relate to the President's speeches, even more so when he is on drugs. The word that sticks in his mind is “sacrifice”, a word that has strong Christian connotations. Probably, Nixon referred to the Vietnam War and the fact that the American nation had to sacrifice some of its children for the benefit of all. In order to secure democracy, sacrifices had to be made. This idea of making sacrifices for the sake of other considerations is a biblical idea that was also lived by the Puritans, who, for the sake of their mission, punished intruders, people with different opinions or people they considered heathens. The fact that Duke highlights the word “sacrifice” tells the reader how significant this idea of making a sacrifice is to him and therefore, how ingrained this notion is in his character. Nevertheless, the reader is left with a feeling of guilt as

the sacrifice Nixon promotes involves the lives of people. The American government chose the right to decide over the lives of soldiers and civilians by not withdrawing from the Vietnam War.

Duke is perturbed by the President's words and Dr. Gonzo tells him to calm down and not try to fight "it" because it will eventually kill him. It is not clear from the text if Dr. Gonzo explicitly refers to the drug Duke had taken or if he means Nixon's speech and therefore the authorities. This ambiguity allows one to claim that this passage indirectly describes the hopelessness the characters feel about the American authorities in 1971. For them, there seems to be no possibility to oppose the government because the fight is simply despairing - "you'll just wither up and die", Dr. Gonzo asserts (134). To avoid any further confrontation and hassle, Dr. Gonzo changes the channel, similar to Duke who tunes into another world with the help of drugs.

In *Campaign Trail*, Dr. Thompson often recites extracts from the Bible, for example, at the beginning of the December article and makes references to God which sometimes appear to be like desperate prayers, for example: "How long, O Lord...How long? Where will it end?" (125). Sometimes he adopts the tone and style of a priest, for example: "A very strange option, in any year – but in mid-February of 1972 there were no visible signs, in New Hampshire, that the citizenry was about to rise up and drive the swine out of the temple" (244). In this passage, Dr. Thompson refers to the biblical story of Jesus throwing merchants out of a temple. Dr. Thompson uses this image to describe the political situation in America in 1972 because he thinks that the American people will not vote for McGovern in order to kick Nixon out of the White House. On the following pages of this article, he continuously refers to Christian leaders such as Noah and Moses to compare the political process to biblical events. Nevertheless, this

constitutes a mockery of Christian faith, and Dr. Thompson makes his aversion to the Church very clear: “Of course. Easter morning. Somewhere in Syria the junkies are rolling away the rock. All over the world they are celebrating, once again, the symbolic release of the Church – two thousand years of vengeance” (137). His nasty, ironic comment exemplifies that the narrator has no sympathy for the church and uses his references more as dramatic devices and mock remarks than serious comments.

At one point, he describes himself as being recognized as a traitor: “There was shock and repugnance in his eyes – as if he had just recognized me as a lineal descendant of Judas Iscariot” (355). Dr. Thompson, who is standing in a Nixon Youth happening where no press is allowed, denounces one of his colleagues who in return looks at him in terror as the Nixon Youth members want to expulse them. Dr. Thompson compares himself to Judas, the apostle who betrayed Jesus for money, in order to dramatize the situation. For the journalist, it seems no difficulty to separate himself from his own kind, the press, and to mock the others.

3.3 The Fear of Being Caught

In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, the characters' criminal actions do not go unnoticed and their permanent fear of being caught also mirrors the authoritarian system in which they find themselves. It is obvious that Duke and his attorney are not playing by the rules, for example, when they are driving the red convertible under the influence of LSD:

We had several narrow escapes...Suddenly people were screaming at us. We were in trouble. Two thugs wearing red-gold military overcoats were looming over the hood: “What the hell are you doing? One screamed. “You can't park *here!*” “Why not?” I said. It seemed like a reasonable

place to park, plenty...of space. Which turned out to be the sidewalk in front of the main entrance to the Desert Inn...

For a moment I thought we had blown it...then one of the doorman reached out for the bill, saying: “OK, OK. I'll take care of it, sir.” And he tore off a parking stub.

“Holy shit!” I said, as we hurried through the lobby. “*They* [emphasis added] almost had us there” (43ff.).

These paragraphs are exemplary of various scenes in which one of the characters is grabbed by the fear of being caught by what they refer to as “they”, that is the police, the authorities, the public that would not tolerate their excessive behavior. Despite their crimes, they always manage to escape either by offering money to the people who catch them in action, pretending to be part of the system, for example, by acting like undercover cops, or inventing lies about their situation like the Lucy story.²⁶ Both characters are fully aware of the fact that their behavior is not appropriate, even for Las Vegas where the authorities are probably more tolerant than somewhere else and where “they love a drunk. Fresh meat” (46). Although Vegas is a Sin City and a place where money is made out of excess, one has to be careful not to cross the line of what is morally acceptable for society. Any alternative behavior, for example, the use of marijuana or LSD is not tolerated and will be punished. Raoul Duke lets the reader know that he is risking incarceration when he states that “until about a year ago, there was a giant billboard on the outskirts of Las Vegas saying:

DON'T GAMBLE WITH MARIJUANA!

IN NEVADA: POSSESSION – 20 YEARS

²⁶ Dr. Gonzo brings a young girl from Montana, Lucy, whom he had given LSD, into their hotel room. Duke is scared that she might snitch on them and tell the police, so they bring her to another hotel and totally paranoid, Dr. Gonzo later calls her and acts if he was being attacked in order to scare her so that she does not call again.

SALE – LIFE! (42).

One can imagine what would happen if the police found Duke's satchel full of all kinds of drugs, marijuana being the most harmless one. To the reader it becomes more and more evident that Duke and his attorney are not gambling for money but rather gamble with their lives during their quest for the American Dream, similar to the settlers who pushed the frontier forward in order to establish themselves in the wilderness.

When they are sitting at the Merry-Go-Round bar in the Circus-Circus, where they detect “the main nerve”²⁷ of the American Dream, they have to hurry again to get out of the place, as the bar tender and other people are looking suspiciously at them: “I waited until he was almost in front of me, then I reached out to grab him – but he jumped back and went around the circle again. This made me very nervous. I felt on the verge of a freakout. The bartender seemed to be watching us. Carson City, I thought. Twenty years” (50). Duke is depicting the state of fear they find themselves in because of their drugged behavior. He feels that he is going to freak out if he does not leave the place and the people who distrustfully watch them. He refers to the Nevada State Prison that is located in Carson City and sees him being imprisoned for at least twenty years due to his actions. This fear of being caught by authorities increases with the gradual decline of their conduct. It reaches a first peak when Duke wakes up in the hotel room and realizes that Dr. Gonzo has left, the hotel bill is immense and that he cannot pay for it. Again, Duke is close to a major breakdown:

Madness, madness...and meanwhile all alone with the Great Red Shark²⁸
in the parking lot of the Las Vegas airport. To hell with this panic. Get a
grip. *Maintain*. For the next twenty-four hours this matter of personal
control will be critical. Here I am sitting out here alone in this fucking

²⁷ *Vegas* 48.

²⁸ Duke names the first car the “Great Red Shark”. The second convertible is called the “White Whale”, referring to Melville's Ahab and Moby-Dick, another symbol of the American Dream.

desert, in this nest of armed loonies, with a very dangerous carload of hazards, horrors and liabilities that I *must* get back to L.A. Because if they nail me out here, I'm doomed. Completely fucked. No question about that. No future for a doctor of journalism editing the state pen weekly. Better to get the hell out of this atavistic state at high speed (71).

He is very afraid of the situation in which he finds himself. If he cannot leave Vegas, he will be imprisoned. His description underline the frontier character of Vegas as it is far away in the desert, people in this “nest” are armed and the whole state is “atavistic”, which implies that there is something ancient, traditional and rough about the place. Duke is not made for this surrounding and desires to flee, as his alternative lifestyle does not correspond with the values of Vegas.

Duke knows that in current society, there is no place for a freak like him and that “For a loser, Vegas is the meanest town on earth” (42). Las Vegas is like a playground for people with money and influence: “This was Bob Hope's turf. Frank Sinatra's. Spiro Agnew's. The lobby fairly reeked of high-grade formica and plastic palm trees – it was clearly a high-class refuge for Big Spenders” (44). Bob Hope and Frank Sinatra were famous celebrities and Spiro Agnew, the Vice-President of Richard Nixon was known to be friends with these stars. Duke clarifies that it is not only the authorities, which are influential in Vegas, but more importantly the celebrities who have money that makes them powerful. He highlights the plastic artificiality of the clubs and one could argue that by putting it into the same paragraph as the celebrities and Spiro Agnew, Duke refers to the artificiality of these people. Their names and reputation are famous and they are well-liked guests because of their money and influence, so it does not matter if they are corrupt and criminal, as in the case of Spiro Agnew.²⁹ Obviously, stardom and

²⁹ Spiro Agnew was later accused of bribery and corruption and resigned from his post as Vice-President in 1973.

money go hand in hand with influence.

Duke is not only appalled by the superficiality that is displayed in Las Vegas but more importantly by the American people he witnesses in the city. He feels like he is surrounded by madness, although most people might assume that the only mad persons around are Dr. Gonzo and Duke themselves. They feel compelled to act upon this madness or find now other way to deal with it and start playing pranks and mocking people, similar to the rogue or Vice character in Early English drama.

3.4 Pranks & Revulsion

HST's main characters share characteristics with the allegorical Vice figure that appeared in English Morality plays and was later developed into the clown or rogue figures. The Vice is a representation of human weaknesses and vices, and a composite character: First, he is the opponent of the good people, then the corrupter of Man and he acts as the comical buffoon (see Cushman 72). Duke and Dr. Thompson fulfill these aspects to a certain extent: Both do not act according to the common rules, play pranks and exaggerate reality that often corrupts the people around them and through their jokes they are often attributed the role of clowns. The most important trademark of Vice is his humor that mocks everything and everyone, especially the Church and people's (false) morality. Duke's and Dr. Thompson's pranks are mostly rhetorical and appear to be “the worst kind of smug ridicule directed against the ordinary and unsuspecting” (Hellmann 78). But Duke transforms the jokes into satirical comments on the status quo of society by portraying “himself as such a paranoid madman” (Hellmann 78). Dr. Gonzo and Duke have to avoid Lucy, the young girl that Gonzo has picked up at the airport and given LSD, as she could be dangerous for them. Therefore, Gonzo calls her and tells her that “they'll trace the call and put you straight behind bar...I have to act

casual, or they'll capture me too...I think I'll probably use a different name, but I'll let you know what it is" (*Vegas* 130). Again, the character refers to "they" without specifying whom he exactly means. Lucy is presented this paranoid story and Gonzo intensifies it by screaming into the receiver "'No! Get away from me! I'm innocent!'" and kicking the phone and Lucy, probably intimidated by Gonzo's story, does not call again. This prank appears to be necessary to the protagonists and "the primary motivating force is the same one behind the drug taking and laughter: survival" (Hellmann 80). Duke and his attorney fight fire with fire and adapt to the surrounding, which they perceive as menacing to their freedom in order to survive.

In *Campaign Trail*, Dr. Thompson also shows some of these playful traits, for example, when he recounts the story about a guy he names Boohoo, who terrorized the Muskie whistle stop train with Thompson's press credentials (see 103ff.). The narrator reveals that he had actually given the credentials to this man and that this incident was his fault. He seems to enjoy the story and its consequences, and Hellmann argues that "these roguish tactics enable Dr. Thompson to survive in an environment which induces extreme psychic pressure" (96).

This argument is supported by a scene in *Vegas* in which Duke and Dr. Gonzo fool a policeman at the convention by telling him lies about incredible brutal murders of Satan worshippers that scare the district attorney, but he nevertheless believes them. They tell him that the only way to deal with these criminals is cutting off their heads or attacking them with Dobermans (see 147ff.). According to Hellman, "his [the officer's] equally easy acceptance of virtually identical counter-measures, suggests the extent of paranoia and hatred across America" (79). Therefore, similar to, for example, Falstaff, Duke utters social criticism through his (rhetorical) pranks and helps to depict reality, although in an exaggerated way.

HST does not only use pranks and roguish behavior to describe the madness his characters perceive around them. The narrators also take single persons or groups of people as exemplary of the society in which they find themselves. With the description of the individuals, they manage to paint a frightening picture of the American society in the early 1970s.

3.5 This is a Mad Society³⁰

The American scholar Max Stites argues that Thompson “recognises that far from being an aberration of American society and convention, Las Vegas as a gambling paradise epitomises that very society” (91). Vegas not only symbolizes gambling and quick bucks but more importantly describes a society that is fascinated by the accumulation of wealth.

When Duke and his attorney enter the Circus-Circus on the Strip, he explains that “The Circus-Circus is what the whole hep world would be doing on Saturday night if the Nazis had won the war. This is the Sixth Reich” (46). This loaded statement indicates the underlying violence and madness Duke is surrounded by, which seems to be acceptable and normal in Vegas. Stites claims that “the violence and perversion such images symbolise has an intimate involvement with both the American Dream and the games themselves” (91). He concludes that “the betting that defines every moment of the existence of Las Vegas is not seen as merely a foolhardy, potentially distasteful pursuit of a few moments' entertainment and the potential of greater wealth, but instead as an indicative symptom of a sick society suffering from hypocritical, decaying ideals” (91). To depict this society as a whole, Duke meets all sorts of characters, from classic gamblers, to redneck cops, to journalists who do not take their job seriously or casino

³⁰ This is a phrase from the song “Mad Society” by Die Hunns, lyrics written by Duane Peters, 2000.

owners that apparently live the American Dream. The author applies a *Pars pro Toto*, as these individual characters should give the reader an impression of the overall American society in 1971 as perceived by Duke and Dr. Thompson – an impression which is not very positive. Both narrators tend to point their fingers at society, separating themselves from what happens around them. Nevertheless, they do not completely step aside – Duke and Dr. Thompson detach themselves from their fellow Americans, on the one hand, but, on the other, they always communicate that they are part of the society they criticize.

For example, when Duke steps into a pharmacy in Las Vegas to buy tequila, rum and a pint of ether, he is surprised that the clerk, who sells him these goods, does not even bother to ask why he needs a pint of ether: “He didn't give a fuck about ether. I wondered what he would say if I asked him for \$22 worth of Romilar and a tank of nitrous oxide. Probably he would have sold it to me. Why not? Free enterprise...” (101). The journalist is startled by the reaction of the pharmacy clerk who does not care about Duke's purchase. It seems as if Duke had expected at least some formal request of a license or for what he needs the ether, which, after all, can be used as anesthetic. Duke blames the cashier for not caring about what people might do with the goods they buy in pharmacies. He suggests that although he looks like a freak, he could have bought anything, for example, a large amount of the cough suppressant Romilar.³¹ This behavior makes him wonder about the state of American morality. Nevertheless, Duke supports the clerk's reaction by claiming that it is just the spirit of free enterprise. Making profit is the most important goal, so why would a clerk worry about a customer's intentions? In addition, by asking himself “Why not?” Duke seems to convince himself of the righteousness of the clerk's behavior. It becomes again evident

³¹ Romilar was often misused due to its sedative effects.

that in the quest for the American Dream, money, not morality, is what counts.

The profit-oriented society of Las Vegas is contrasted with the place where the people that did not succeed, go, when Dr. Gonzo and Duke drive to North Vegas and figure out that “North Vegas is where you go when you've fucked up once too often on the Strip, and when you're not even welcome in the cut-rate downtown places around Casino Center” (155). Duke explains that if you are a drug addict, prostitute, freak, or any kind of loser, “in terms of commercial acceptability, it means you're finished in all the right places” (155). As mentioned above, money makes people important in Vegas. If you do not have any, you are not desired, at least not on main street. Someone like Duke is only respected on the Strip because people assume he has unlimited credit and therefore he can enjoy all the amenities Vegas offers, such as room service or large convertible cars with full insurance coverage. In a town that promotes winning, any losers or freaks ruin the peaceful, but artificial picture. He also explains that in Las Vegas, it does not matter who runs a profitable casino like the Desert Inn or the Flamingo. Profit is profit, no matter if it is in the hands of a mafia criminal like Lucky Luciano or one of the nation's brightest stars like Howard Hughes (see 155). The neon lights and fancy hotels blind the people that go to Vegas.

This idea is later supported by a conversation Duke has in the Circus-Circus with a person named Bruce. They talk about the American Dream and Duke claims to have found it in Vegas, which surprises Bruce. Duke tells him that they are sitting “on the main nerve right now” and about the owner of the Circus-Circus, who as a kid dreamed of running away with a circus: “‘Now the bastard has his own circus, and a license to steal, too.’ He nodded. ‘You're right – he's the model.’ ‘Absolutely,’ I said. ‘It's pure Horatio Alger, all the way down to his attitude’” (191). Once more, the narrator evokes

the Alger myth in his speech when he refers to the owner of the Circus-Circus who actually made it from a poor kid wanting to be in a circus to a man who owns his own circus. Bruce adds that he does not only have a circus, but also “a license to steal” as the house mostly wins and not the gamblers. Again, the main notion of the American Dream is profit and by eliciting that the owner might be cheating people, the characters highlight that the goal justifies the means.

On another instance, Duke explains that although one is carefully monitored in Vegas, one can go crazy, as long as one obeys a major rule and leaves big tips: “The only bedrock rule is Don't Burn the Locals. Beyond that, nobody cares. They would rather not know. If Charlie Manson checked into the Sahara tomorrow morning, nobody would hassle him as long as he tipped big” (106). By referring to the killer Charles Manson, who gathered his sect in the desert of Nevada, he underlines that no matter how crazy and even dangerous a person is, she/he will be treated well in Vegas as long as she/he spends enough money and provides the locals with more profit. Obviously, the people in Vegas are used to crazies, for example, the “doormen and floorwalkers who assume that anybody who acts crazy, but still tips big, *must* be important...” (190). Madness is tolerated if it brings money –the society Duke describes seems to be very superficial.

The reader is constantly reminded of the hollowness of the American Dream. HST portrays a society that relentlessly follows its dreams of profit and influence and does not care if business harms other people. The world Duke is surrounded by seems to be cruel, focused on money, fake appearances and looks, for example: “I stopped at a red light and got lost, for a moment, in a sunburst of flesh in the cross-walk: fine sinewy tights, pink mini-skirts, ripe young nipples, sleeveless blouses, long sweeps of blonde hair, pink lips and blue eyes – all the hallmarks of a dangerously innocent culture”

(172). This ironic statement refers to the idea that the public perceives American youth as innocent and moral, whereas to Duke, the short skirts and pink lips are dangerous, as they do not represent the common notion of morality and innocence. The women that pass by obviously fit the cliché of “perfect women” – they are young, blond, blue-eyed and wear short skirts. Duke only highlights their appearances, their superficial qualities as if there was no other layer to these women. They simply look good, so why worry about their character. One can make a connection to the American Dream that as a myth appeals and “looks good”, but if one penetrates deeper into it, one discovers that it is a hollow construct, only made to appeal, similar Las Vegas that would be a deserted place if people had not artificially erected the neon lights.

In *Campaign Trail*, the narrator is even more explicit about the hollowness and superficiality of American society:

This may be the year when we finally come fact 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 (413ff.).

Like Duke in *Vegas*³², Dr. Thompson compares Americans to used car salesmen whose main goal is to have enough money and power not to be bothered by others. If they are bothered, they fight back. The disgust for his nation forces him to lament the loss of the ideals on which the U.S. was founded:

The tragedy of all this is that George McGovern...is one of the few men who've run for President of the United States in this country who really understands what a fantastic monument to all the best instincts of the

³² See HST, *Vegas* 57.

human race this country might have been, if we could have kept it out of the hands of greedy little hustlers like Richard Nixon (414).

Dr. Thompson evokes one of the main reasons for which Europeans settled on the North American continent - the dream of establishing a society and nation that represents all the good that is incorporated in the human race. To him, though, dishonest opportunists who only wanted to make money and acquire power and did not care about the nation and its inhabitants have mostly corrupted these ideals. However, he also explains that for him this dream has been transforming into a nightmare, as “The ugly fallout from the American Dream has been coming down on us at a pretty consistent rate since Sitting Bull's time – and the only real difference now, with Election Day '72 only a few weeks away, is that we seem to be on the verge of *ratifying* the fallout and forgetting the Dream itself” (394). For Dr. Thompson, the presidential election in 1972 bears more significance than just voting for a new president – it also incorporates the American Dream that the American president has in his hands and that he can help prospering or as Nixon did in Thompson's opinion, killing it by being corrupt. The reporter lacks faith in the righteousness of American politicians and thinks that “they actually believe, now, that all it takes to become a Congressman or a Senator – or even a President – is a nice set of teeth, a big wad of money, and half-dozen Media Specialists” (72). Thompson again highlights the meaningless of the American Dream and its values as they have shifted to money and charisma.

3.5.1 They hate Us – We hate Them!³³

It cannot be denied that the people who Raoul Duke and Dr. Thompson despise the most are authorities, especially the police. First, because they have the power to punish

³³ Quote from the song “Police Story” by Black Flag, written by Greg Ginn, released in 1981.

the protagonists for the crimes they commit, for example, the possession of drugs, but also because for them, the police represent some of the most ignorant people inhabiting the American nation.

Duke's aversion for police officers becomes obvious when he checks into the Flamingo Hotel to cover the Annual District Attorney's Drug Convention. As he enters the hotel, about one hundred policemen are waiting in the lobby. He describes them as follows:

The place was full of cops. I saw this at a glance. Most of them were just standing around trying to look casual, all dressed exactly alike in their cut-rate Vegas casuals: plaid bermuda shorts, Arnie Palmer golf shirts and hairless white legs tapering down to rubberized "beach sandals". It was a terrifying scene to walk into – a super stakeout of some kind (106).

One of the policemen is having trouble with his check-in because the receptionist wants to relocate him to another hotel and he gets angry and insults the receptionist as "dirty little faggot" (106). Duke observes the scene:

The police chief's wife was crying; the gaggle of friends that he'd mustered for support were too embarrassed to back him up – even now, in this showdown at the desk, with this angry little cop firing his best and final shot. They knew he was beaten; he was going against the RULES, and the people hired to enforce those rules said 'no vacancy' (107).

The officer's reaction demonstrates his momentary impotence as he suddenly is confronted with a situation in which he does not obtain a powerful position. For Duke, this scene is amusing because usually policemen exercise power. However, in Vegas, the rules seem to be different - people with credit have power, not people who wear a badge. Duke asks the receptionist if he might just quickly check in and the receptionist

registers him without many questions. This, obviously, causes amazement among the policemen who witness the scene:

I nodded and smiled, half-watching the stunned reaction of the cop-crowd right next to me. They were stupid with shock. Here they were arguing with every piece of leverage they could command, for a room they'd already paid for – and suddenly their whole act gets side-swiped by some crusty drifter who looks like something out of an upper-Michigan hobo jungle. And he checks in with a handful of credit cards! Jesus! What's happening in this world? (108)

The officers obviously cannot believe that a “freak” like Duke can check into the hotel without any problems, although he has not even paid for his room in advance as the police did³⁴. This freak also holds several credit cards and is treated in a much friendlier way than the officers. What appears to be most shocking to them is that an upright American policeman is considered less respectable than some random “freak” with a credit card. In this passage, the narrator depicts another side of reality from the position of the officer who has to accept the idea that in Vegas, money is more respectable than an American policeman, which is a job that implies a moral, correct and righteous personality. To American mainstream society, “alternative people” like Duke are frightening for them as they present the moral decline of the country.

Duke later questions the world view of American public when he sees how the exploding drug abuse that America has had to face since the mid 60s is discussed at the police convention. When Dr. Gonzo and Duke enter the Drug Convention, it immediately becomes clear that the American authorities have no idea what they are talking about when they refer to “coming to terms with the American drug culture”

³⁴ The policemen are relocated to another hotel although they had paid for a room in advance (see *Vegas*, 107).

(*Vegas* 144). The convention resembles more “a prehistoric gathering” where some self-appointed drug experts share their insights on the drug scene, for example, Dr. Bloomquist who claims that a joint butt is often named “roach” because it resembles a cockroach” (138). Duke informs the reader that “Dr. Bloomquist's book is a compendium of state bullshit” - it is evident that the theories and stories the experts and cops have suggested are complete nonsense, and the protagonist claims that “these poor bastards didn't know mescaline from macaroni” (143). The convention's participants obviously lack real knowledge about the drug culture and work with all the clichés and myths that have been created around it. As mentioned in a later passage of *Vegas*, the policemen also judge people by their physical appearance and if one had long hair, one was suspected to be a potential drug abuser. Duke recounts the story a neighbor who was incarcerated for one week because the cops assumed he was a vagrant due to his appearance - he had long hair, wore a jean jacket and carried a knapsack:

Wham. Straight to jail. No phone call, no lawyer, no charge. “They put me in the car and took me down to the station,” he said. “They took me into a big room full of people and told me to take off all my clothes before they booked me. I was standing in front of a big desk, about six feet tall, with a cop sitting behind it, looking down at me like some kind of medieval judge (173).

This passage underlines Duke’s idea that the police investigated random people according to their looks and alternative ideas about life – a behavior that demonstrates the powerlessness the authorities are experiencing, their inability to reconcile with a changing society and youth culture.³⁵

³⁵ At the time, many young Americans often were searched and seized without warrant, only because the police officers assumed that the person was a suspect. Many convicts had to endure longer prison sentences for menial charges, for example, the possession of one joint or a small amount of marijuana (see Jacobson, 1481 ff.).

Duke's picture of the drug convention worsens gradually. He cannot believe that American law enforcement struggles with understanding what is happening in their nation and why drug abuse has drastically mounted since the mid 60s. Duke also refers to the fact that some of these policemen are drug users themselves, maybe not "acidheads" but "people who had been in a Seconal stupor since 1964" (144).³⁶ As discussed in Chapter One, not only the youth used drugs to alter their state-of-mind, but also many of their parents sedated themselves with medicine prescribed by their therapists to be able to endure their daily lives. The quote also highlights Duke's idea that the police and therefore, most of the public, were years behind in their understanding of the national situation. Many people were not able to make sense what has been happening in their country, for example, the anti-War protests, university protests, the Black Panther movement, Woodstock, and so forth. They did not see who or what caused these changes and tried to blame the social difficulties on someone, for example, the youth and rock and roll music. Duke identifies one cause of the problem at the convention: "Here were more than a thousand top-level cops telling each other "we must come to terms with the drug culture," but they had no idea where to start. They couldn't even find the goddamn thing. There were rumors in the hallways that maybe the Mafia was behind it. Or perhaps the Beatles" (144). By blaming the social changes and difficulties on someone like the mafia or even the Beatles, the authorities were denying their joint guilt in the current situation. They, like Duke before, looked for someone to blame. The mafia and rock music, for sure, played minor roles in the drug wave. These two examples were readily available devils to be blamed by the authorities and the public. It seems as if the police did not want to accept that the growing consumption of drugs was a product of a changing society. Acknowledging their partial

³⁶ Seconal is a sedative, one of the drugs many Americans were prescribed during the 1960s.

guilt in the rise of violence and criminality would have forced them to confess that something was wrong in the American nation. Due to the latent Puritan ethos that had largely prevailed and that claimed the American people were lead by God, mistakes were impossible. God does not make any mistakes, so the Americans cannot make any either. But who did then? In the 60s, the answer was the youth that did not adhere to American values anymore. To the youth, it was the old generation that was not able to step out of their complacency, preferred to ignore any problems and changes society demanded, and therefore, hindered societal development.

The question “What the hell's goin' on in this country in this country?” is later posed by a policeman who is scared by Duke’s and Dr. Gonzo’s stories about terrifying murders by junkies (145). The officer is shocked that the junkie problem is having such a strong grip on the nation. But the question of what is happening in the American nation is asked by both sides – by the authorities, who have difficulties with dealing with rising violence and drug abuse, and Duke who represents the counterculture that cannot understand why its protests are being ignored, suppressed and that the youth is criticized for their alternative lifestyles. Both sides think that the American nation has lost its connection with its most basic values – for one side, this includes morality and hard work and for the others, morality and freedom, and both sides blame each other for the nation's problems.

This notion of blaming each other is emphasized in a later scene in which Dr. Gonzo, high on drugs, frightens a policeman and his wife in a car by the red lights, pretending to be a war veteran and offering them heroin in a very uncontrolled manner. Duke informs the reader that his attorney is totally losing control and screams at the officer and his wife in the other car. The officer eventually freaks out and insults the Samoan. He, too, loses control. The two characters symbolize the divided sides of

American society: The policeman represents the authorities and to some extent the public, who were powerless and unable to deal with a protesting nation. Dr. Gonzo, who as a part of the counterculture, shows the policeman what developments like, for example, the Vietnam War have triggered. In Duke's eyes, both cultures are losing control. In this situation, there seems to be little room for the American Dream.

This “clash of cultures” is also depicted in the August article of *Campaign Trail* when Dr. Thompson is disgusted with the decadence of some rich Texans in Miami who show “the kind of bloodthirsty arrogance normally associated with the last days of the Roman Empire” (382). During the GOP convention in Miami these people are watching the demonstration of Vietnam Veterans who had come back from the war zone but “not without paying some very heavy dues: an arm gone here, a leg there, paralysis, a face full of lumpy scar tissue...all staring straight ahead as the long silent column moved between rows of hotel porches full of tight-lipped Senior Citizens, through the heart of Miami Beach” (387). This demonstration frightens most of its spectators to silence:

But now there was no jeering. Even the cops seemed deflated....For the first and only time during the whole convention, the cops were clearly off balance....I have been covering anti-war demonstrations with depressing regularity since the winter of 1964, in cities all over the country, and I have never seen cops so intimidated by demonstrators as they were in front of the Fontainebleau Hotel on that hot Tuesday afternoon in Miami Beach (388).

But not only the police is affected by the view of a thousand veterans marching down the street in silence: “Not even that pack of rich sybarites out there on the foredeck of the Wild Rose of Houston could stay in their seats for this show. They were standing up at the rail, looking worried, getting very bad vibrations from whatever was happening

over there in the street” (388). Dr. Thompson describes this clash as a silent spectacle where two extreme sides of America's citizenry come together - rich people with influence, who enjoy their leisure time on boats in Miami, and the Vietnam veterans, who have served their country in a war that most of them consider unnecessary. Both sides represent a much larger part of society, that is the government and the counterculture, the authorities and the protest movement. If one of the policemen had used his riot club, everything would have gotten out of control. It is this feeling that Dr. Thompson and Raoul Duke sense when they witness confrontations of the different sides of American society. They sense an underlying madness, craziness and violence that is mirrored in the people who are depicted by the author. His picture, however, does not evoke much hope for a change.

Both of HST's books capture the feeling of the early 1970s, as the narrators try to make sense of their experiences and the realities they perceive. They constantly refer to the American Dream and that the freedom, which it once represented for them, is being more and more repressed by the authorities. The American Dream of freedom has been exchanged for a dream of consumption and profit. The madness and violence of the reality Thompson's characters observe constitutes the negative side of the dream. The contradiction between the latent Christian ethos and traditional American values, which once were celebrated, and the violent situation that erupted in the 60s, is an important aspect of Thompson's writing. The schism between the myth of the American Dream and the realities of the 1970s, is presented not only in terms of content, symbols and characters, but also via narrative and journalistic techniques, for example, the insertion of drug-infused visions that the author uses to warp his perceptions and spotlight the status-quo of American society and its dream. His writing style is difficult to categorize

as he made use of techniques from different genres. He surpassed the limits of journalism by opening the narrative space and based his stories on factual events. Through the amalgamation of various methods of writing, Hunter Thompson achieved to depict the American Dream and both the positive and negative sides it incorporates. Therefore, the next chapter will focus on how Thompson makes use of various techniques in order to report his observations.

4. A Schizophrenic Society

In *Campaign Trail*, Dr. Thompson refers to „the legendary *duality* – the congenital Split Personality and polarized instincts - that almost everybody except Americans has long since taken for granted as the key to our National Character“ (416). Although scholars like Stuart Hall have dismissed the theory about an underlying collective “American mind” and shown that cultural identity is “not an essence but a continually shifting set of subject position”, the idea of a schizophrenia of the “American mind” is mentioned in several analyses of Thompson's work, for example, by John Hellmann or Max Stites (Barker 229). Hellmann explains this aspect as „a dual nature that embodies the innocent idealism and compulsive violence found also in America's national character;“ (70). Although a “national character” per se does not exist, both of these sides are present in the manifold discourse of America. HST evokes a duality not only in his narrators Raoul Duke and Dr. Thompson, who are torn between their good intentions and criminal actions, but also describes American society as being characterized by “schizophrenia of the mind”. The narrators’ perceptions mirror a society that is torn between a strong idealism and belief in the general righteousness of American democracy, and a violent, corrupt and almost unreal reality. As mentioned before, the American Dream has ever since incorporated two sides – the myth that everyone can succeed and the reality that was often violent and difficult. Hunter Thompson did not discuss the idea of an “American character” in his work but rather painted a picture of American society with the help of narrators that enabled him to depict both, the myth of the American Dream and a subjective reality of America in the early 70s.

For the writer, it was impossible to objectively report “the truth” because a journalist was always personally entangled in the things she/he wrote. The “truth” that conventional journalism proposes, has been shaped by the mass media and often fails to

make sense of the events that happen as the main goal is to deliver non-judgmental information. In the 1960s, people were not able to make sense of the occurrences, for example, the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy, Woodstock or the anti-war demonstrations. They were provided with images of these events, headlines and facts, but lacked explanations, as the media were not able to supply reasons for what was happening. Thompson and fellow writers like Tom Wolfe tried to grasp the spirit of the time by inventing new ways of reporting it. As William McKeen proposed in an interview, Hunter Thompson was more of a reporter in the sense that he gave written accounts of his personal perceptions and shared them with his readers (see McKeen interview, Appendix A). Therefore, his descriptions portray his subjective perception of reality and instead of trying to logically explain the events that he witnessed, he described his personal experience and the mood of situations, people and occurrences.

However, John Hellmann claims that “Thompson creates a verbal construct in which the reader is never sure whether he is experiencing extraordinary fact or extraordinary fantasy” (73). As mentioned before, Thompson’s writing style unites various genres that it becomes impossible to detect what is fact and what is fiction. Because of this, Thompson's observations have often been labeled falsehoods. He acknowledges the fact that his views are often twisted by drug consumption or states-of-mind characterized by fear and loathing. His texts appear so vivid and immediate because of the fact that he blends different genres and exaggerates his narrators’ perceptions, so that they do not merely depict events and people but also catch the atmosphere and underlying mood of situations. Additionally, their frenzies help to represent the sense of alienation they feel in American society. Thompson's aggressive and wild language reinforces the effect of his narrators’ perceptions. By depicting people as predatory animals that are located in a wilderness and fight for survival, he

incorporates a severe criticism of society into his texts. However, HST's protagonists do not step aside and merely point fingers at their fellow citizens – the reporter always includes himself and shows that the situations, which he depicts, affect the whole American society. Hunter S. Thompson represented the status quo of America in the 60s and 70s from his point of view and made his texts valuable sources of social criticism and analyses of the American Dream.

4.1 Countercultural Idealism Betrayed

Thompson can be understood as an American patriot – not in the violent sense of military patriotism but rather in terms of hopes and expectations about his native country. He embraced American traditional values, for example, freedom of speech, and he often referred to the written American documents like *the Declaration of Independence*, which for him were the basic guidelines according to which the nation should function. He criticized the authorities for their disrespect of traditional American values, for example, personal freedom and democracy, due to the introduction of new laws and the severe punishment of the counterculture, for example, the draft-burners or protestors.

In *Campaign Trail*, Dr. Thompson refers to the destruction of the American democratic system through Nixon's policies: “The effects of this takeover are potentially so disastrous – in terms of personal freedom and police power – that there is no point even speculating on the fate of some poor, misguided geek who might want to take his “Illegal Search & Seizure” case all the way up to the top” (37). For the reporter, personal freedom is a cornerstone of American democracy as stated in the Fourth Amendment of the Constitution. According to this law, authorities are not allowed to search a person's property without warrant and probable cause. Nevertheless, in the 60s

many hippies were searched, seized and incarcerated due to their alternative looks and the common belief that all of them were drug-abusers (see HST, *Vegas* 173). Thompson was appalled by the unnecessary police brutality that he encountered all over the US, for example, at the Democratic convention in Chicago in 1968. For him, the increasing violence reflected the feeling of powerlessness especially the authorities were experiencing in a period of social upheaval.

Thompson's writings also mirror many of the counterculture's hopes and expectations that, as mentioned in Chapter One, generally resembled the basic ideas the Founding Fathers had in mind when they wrote the *Constitution*. When Lyndon B. Johnson refused to run for reelection in March 1968, the counterculture felt as if the doors to a new world were open:

It was like driving an evil King off the throne. Nobody knew exactly what would come next, but we all understood that whatever happened would somehow be a product of the "New Consciousness." By May it was clear that the next President would be either Gene McCarthy or Bobby Kennedy and The War would be over by Christmas...(HST, *Campaign* 140).

It was as if the American Dream of a new beginning was revived and the possibilities for the hippies and activists seemed innumerable. Inspired by a new consciousness about the reality in which they lived, they had a common vision of a world free from corruption and where humans could be the way, they want to be without being harassed by the authorities. This view can be interpreted as a rebirth of the Puritan ordeal since the hippies had a vision similar to the one of their ancestors.

However, their vision was soon blurred by the following events that Dr. Thompson describes in *Campaign Trail*:

What happened after that, between April and November of 1968, plunged a whole generation of hyper-political young Americans into a terminal stupor...It is hard to even remember precisely – much less explain – just what a terrible bummer the last half of '68 turned into...

By Labor Day it was all over. “The Movement” was finished, except for the trials, and somebody else was dealing. The choice between Nixon & Humphrey was no choice at all – not in the context of what had already gone down, between Selma and Chicago (141).

In this passage, Dr. Thompson summarizes the disappointment the counterculture and many others felt when their ideas were betrayed by the events that happened in America in 1968. The shooting of leading figures such as Martin Luther King and Bobby Kennedy, the election of Richard Nixon and the final breakdown at the Chicago Democratic convention closed the doors to a new society and radically altered the mood in the nation. The hopes and dreams of many were destroyed by the quickly changing reality.

During the '72 campaign trail, Thompson, who hoped that a change would occur, is struck by disillusionment about Nixon's probable reelection: “This may be the year when we finally come face to face with ourselves; finally just lay back and say it – that we really are 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” (413ff.). Like in *Vegas*, Thompson describes the American citizens as “a nation of used car salesmen” which implies that in his opinion, many Americans sell secondhand dreams that happen to be lies (see *Vegas* 57). He does not hide his disaffection for the American reality in the early 70s, as he believes in the traditional values that have once made the nation proud:

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 (*Campaign* 414).

This quote represents Dr. Thompson's traditional idea of America that incorporates one of the oldest images of America as the place to redeem humanity. For the reporter, the U.S. could have been an exemplary nation, but due to the corrupt and criminal deeds of many politicians, officials and citizens, the reality looked rather grim. Also to him, Richard Nixon seemed to embody all that was wrong with American society.

These critical passages of Thompson's writing are written in a journalistic style and do not contain drug produced fantasies. One gets the feeling that the narrator's perceptions are trustworthy and that he is not high. This overt criticism is often separated from the story line or expressed in short tangents, and appears more often in *Campaign Trail* than in *Vegas*, in which the narrator is less reliable. Both texts constitute a harsh attack on authorities, especially politicians, that is often hidden behind the mask of hallucinations caused by drugs and the amalgamation of truth and fantasy. These passages that often feature a vivid imagery reflect the anger and violence Thompson's narrators feel about the state of the American nation and its citizens.

4.2 Violent Realities

The reality Thompson's characters depict is a personal one – they describe what happens around them from a subjective point of view and do not claim to report the truth but

their personal experiences. The narrators, Raoul Duke and Dr. Thompson, acknowledge the fact that they are under the influence of drugs and alcohol that alter their states of mind inasmuch they repeatedly suffer from hallucinations, visions or flashbacks. The reader is made aware of the narrators' conditions by short explanations so that she/he can identify the less reliable passages as such. Other stories and tangents are so exaggerated and crazy that the reader remains skeptical about the truth of what is narrated.

The fantastic elements, such as hallucinations, that the author introduces serve as tools that dramatize and visualize the narrator's perception of reality. For example, at the very beginning of *Vegas*, Raoul Duke points out that they were “on the edge of the desert when the drugs began to take hold” (3). With this statement, he clarifies that drugs influence following account. The narrator prepares the reader for the subsequent hallucinations that include bats, eels and Gila monsters. What he communicates with these figments of imagination is not that he is “on a trip”, but they rather illustrate the terror and fear that Duke feels and that he cannot express in plain descriptions. The author had to create strong images to convey his impressions and feelings.

In the third sentence of *Vegas*, the reader is already confronted with Duke's hallucinations: “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...And a voice was screaming: “Holy Jesus! What are these goddamn animals?” (3). The bats that Duke hallucinates appear to be omens - prophetic both of the city to which the protagonists are going and the animalistic qualities of its inhabitants, and of the fact that Duke will be seeing more things that are purely fantasized. The reader is prepared for what is coming next, but at the same plunges right into the action without any introductions. The author gives the reader no time to relax.

When they check into the Mint Hotel, Duke tries to “ignore this terrible drug”, but the LSD provokes him to see the receptionist turning into a monster: “The woman's face was *changing*: swelling, pulsing...horrible green jowls and fangs jutting out, the face of a Moray Eel! Deadly poison!” (23ff.). Duke is terrified when the woman mentions that someone is looking for him: “‘No!’ I shouted. ‘Why? We haven't *done* anything yet!’” (23). He fears that the police are chasing and going to imprison him. The acid he has consumed intensifies his paranoia and makes people around him transform into menacing animals. His hallucinations worsen when Duke and Dr. Gonzo enter the hotel lobby: “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” (24). Duke perceives a petrifying scene in which reptiles eat each other and blood is spilled all over the floor. It is evident that he does not see actual monsters in the lobby, but that people only appear to be monsters. Thompson uses these hallucinations to utter criticism of the scenes with which his protagonists have to deal. It is a visual critique of the repulsive superficiality that can be witnessed in Las Vegas’ hotel lobbies. Max Stites argues that “the passage also suggests the violent, and to Thompson, inhuman character of the individuals and society he finds himself surrounded by” (52). By transforming people into animals, Thompson highlights the cruelty and inhumanity his protagonist faces “to present an allegory of a slice of American society” (Stites 53).

Duke is even more frightened when he realizes that “We're right in the middle of a fucking reptile zoo! And somebody's giving *booze* to these goddamn things! It won't be long before they tear us to shreds. Jesus, look at the floor! Have you ever *seen* so much blood? How many have they killed *already*?” (24ff.). Duke fears that the reptiles will soon turn to him and his attorney so that they become the same. He acknowledges

the fact that “as an American and patron of Las Vegas, he cannot escape being complicit in this society” (Stites 53ff.).

Shortly after the lobby scene, the protagonists enter their hotel room and Duke admits that his hallucinations are diminishing so that he does no longer see “huge pterodactyls lumbering around the corridors in pools of fresh blood” (27). The author informs the readers that now the narrator can be trusted to a larger extent than before, and that the events that occur are less likely to be purely fantasized. Nevertheless, the reader is immediately confronted with another reptile that threatens the narrator: “There's a big...machine in the sky...some kind of electric snake...coming straight at us” (27). His attorney advises him to shoot it, but Duke answers with a funny comment: “Not yet...I want to study its habits” (27). Duke perceives the neon lights of Vegas through the windows and has difficulties identifying them as lights. Although the narrator reports that the drug effects have decreased, the reader is made aware of the fact that his perception is still altered. Duke is not able to determine the neon lights that for him resemble an aggressive electric snake. Despite the fact that he is scared, the protagonist cannot help but be humorous. The comical elements often mix with hallucinations or reinforce their effects. It seems as if jokes provided a way to escape “the reality” Duke perceives (see Hellmann 77).

The narrator is not only terrified by the people in Las Vegas, but also by the city and its glaring neon signs. The artificial surroundings appear as inhuman and primitive. The author expresses Duke’s constant paranoia by shocking the readers with warped hallucinations that graphically demonstrate the protagonists’ feelings. These animals also constitute an allegorical description of American society. Instead of simply calling the people that he meets ruthless and corrupt, he introduces fantastic passages to warp his perceptions.

The drug stimulated passages can mainly be identified as such as they are “anything but subtle or understated: they practically scream that they are the invention of the author's mind” (Stites 83). For Raoul Duke, the reality in Las Vegas is “too twisted” and hallucinogenic drugs worsen his condition so that he constantly feels menaced or repulsed by the surroundings (HST, *Vegas* 47). Nevertheless, there is always a core of truth in his visions – one cannot overcome the feeling that Duke's drugged mind only *exaggerates* his impressions of the city:

...so you're down on the main floor playing blackjack, and the stakes are getting high when suddenly you chance to look up, and there, right smack above your head is a half-naked fourteen-year old girl being chased through the air by a snarling wolverine, which is suddenly locked in a death battle with two silver-painted Polacks who come swinging down from opposite balconies and meet in the mid-air on the wolverine's neck...both Polacks seize the animal as they fall straight down towards the crap tables-but they bounce off the net; they separate and spring back up towards the roof in three different directions, and just as they're about to fall again they are grabbed out of the air by three Korean Kittens and trapezed off to one of the balconies.

This madness goes on and on, but nobody seems to notice (46).

In the artificial surrounding of Las Vegas, scenes like this seem absolutely possible. The exaggeration is obvious, but nevertheless the reader believes Duke that this crazy casino/circus setting actually exists. The writer only exaggerated the bizarre ongoing, not only because he wants to display the effects of ether, but more importantly to highlight the artificiality and surreal qualities of Las Vegas.

Often, such descriptions express a masked violent mood. The author wanted to

convey the dark forces that he thought to be present in Las Vegas and that for him are violently obvious (see Stites 83). Actually, Duke seems to be the only person that notices the savagery and recklessness that affects society in Las Vegas. Through the series of fantastic passages in the story, Thompson expressed the distorted and violent reality of Las Vegas he had perceived. The reader can identify these fantastic elements as one is made aware of the fact that Duke is taking drugs, which can alter his condition and cause hallucinations. Nevertheless, the constant references to the madness, the bizarre events and the “animalistic society” evoke the feeling that there is something grossly wrong in Las Vegas. Although the account is taking place in America’s largest “playground”, it seems as if Thompson’s critique is not restricted to Las Vegas’ city limits. Rather, the city, the events and people are allegorical representations of American society at the time as viewed by the author. For him, the nation’s “sickness” does not only affect Las Vegas, but the whole country, including its capital.

4.2.1 Political Animals

Richard Nixon was one of America's most controversial presidents who perturbed America with his connection to the Watergate scandal due to which he resigned from office. Thompson's worst suspicions about Nixon were affirmed by the accusations against him. When Nixon vanished from the public scene, HST lost his most important antagonist, who simultaneously served as a muse that inspired the journalist to write some of his most famous passages. For Thompson, Nixon embodied all the negative aspects of the American dream and the writer felt obliged to express his opinion about the politician. In *Vegas* and *Campaign Trail*, references to the president are relatively harmless compared to what the journalist wrote about him in later articles, for example, in Nixon's obituary. HST, who talked to Nixon once during the campaign trail, never

liked the politician and made him responsible for many of the problems the U.S. had to face during the late 60s and early 70s. For example, in *Campaign Trail* Dr. Thompson argues that “the ugly fallout from the American Dream has been coming down on us at a pretty consistent rate since Sitting Bull's time-and the only real difference now, with Election Day '72 only a few weeks away, is that we seem to be on the verge of *ratifying* the fallout and forgetting the Dream itself” (*Campaign* 394). The narrator refers to the probable reelection of Nixon and its implications for America. By referring to the American Dream, Thompson implies the innumerable possibilities that he attributed to the nation and that vanished with the rupture of the counterculture and the election of Nixon. In President Nixon Thompson saw what he expressed through his narrators - “that dark, venal, and incurably violent side of the American character almost every other country in the world has learned to fear and despise” (*Campaign* 416). Nixon, as first man in the country and American archetype, represents a negative aspect of the American Dream because he has succeeded, but not without making sacrifices. Dr. Thompson claims that

our Barbie doll President, with his Barbie doll wife and his box-full of Barbie doll children is also America's answer to the monstrous Mr. Hide. He speaks for the Werewolf in us; the bully, predatory shyster who turns into something unspeakable, full of claws and bleeding string-warts, on nights when the moon comes too close (416ff.).

Dr. Thompson's opinion about the President is made absolutely clear: For him, Nixon has a perfect, although superficial image and represents a “perfect American” by daylight. But at night, when the public eye is no longer watching his steps, he turns into a werewolf, a predatory beast that acts unscrupulous and fraudulent. HST's characters act in similar ways. Raoul Duke, for example, is led by idealistic ideas that do not

correspond with his illegal and often violent acts.

The werewolf idea of Nixon is extended into a fictitious tale about him running to the Watergate hotel.³⁷ The tale is representative for various similar passages that Thompson inserts in his journalistic reports and that vividly depict his opinion of politicians, officials, fellow workers, citizens and himself. For the journalist, the world apparently was full of beasts, and he portrayed that if one was not cautious enough, one turned into a beast oneself.

4.2.2 He who Makes a Beast of Himself, Gets Rid of the Pain of Being a Man³⁸

In *Vegas*, drunken lizards and Gila monsters surround Raoul Duke. The author inserted purely imaginary descriptions in his stories that based on real events – he did walk into a hotel lounge in Las Vegas and attended the drug convention, but it was people that he saw there, not monsters. Through the drugs that the narrator has consumed, the reality he perceives is distorted and people turn into beasts. On an interpretative level, these animals represent a violent aspect of American society. By weaving these hallucinations into his report about Las Vegas, the author expresses the negative mood, which he detects in society, that otherwise would have been difficult to grasp. Hellmann argues that in *Vegas*, Thompson “continues to alternate between and merge such interior and exterior hallucinations” and that as a result “the reader is made aware of how artificial, distorted, finally unreal the neon actuality of contemporary America is” (76).

Before the lobby scene, Raoul Duke informs the readers that he has consumed drugs and that subsequently his perceptions are altered. When he enters the lobby and sees reptiles, the reader can easily assume that this is a purely fictional passage.

³⁷ At the time, first speculations about Nixon’s involvement in the Watergate scandal were published.

³⁸ Quote by Samuel Johnson, quoted in HST, *Vegas* 1.

However, the effect of these passages is more important than the narrator's reliability. The negatively connoted vocabulary that the author uses in such fantastic passage, for example, *reptiles, blood, muck, claws, kill*, and so forth, helps portraying the fear and loathing that his protagonist feels. The reader is provided a vivid and threatening description of what it felt to be in the decadent Las Vegas of 1971 in the eyes of HST.

However, these predatory animals do not only exist in Sin City. During the presidential campaign, Dr. Thompson also meets many beasts and points out that for him, the worst kind of animal is the political animal.

One of the politicians Dr. Thompson dislikes the most next to Richard Nixon is Hubert Humphrey. On the campaign trail, the journalist releases various negative statements about the Democratic politician that exemplify the antipathy he felt for the candidate, for example: "With the possible exception of Nixon, Hubert Humphrey is the purest and most disgusting example of a Political Animal in American politics today" (205). Dr. Thompson suggests that Humphrey has never been working for the people but is an opportunist who has used the political arena to succeed in life (see 205). Before applying the animal imagery and calling the candidate a "swine", Dr. Thompson insults Humphrey as a "treacherous, gutless old ward-heeler who should be put in a goddamn bottle and sent out with the Japanese Current" (135). The journalist's dislike of the politician is so strong that he plants a rumor about Humphrey being addicted to a strange drug called Ibogaine. This prank serves not only a humorous insertion in the more journalistic analysis of the campaign, but it also conveys how little respect Dr. Thompson felt for the politician. Hellmann explains that "Dr. Thompson appends similes that are blatant, succinct and so consistently bestial that they reduce the political world of supposedly complex passions and subtle strategies to his own private allegory

of appetite” (92). As campaign progresses, the journalist can no longer hide his frustration with the political process. This despair causes him to use more animal related vocabulary in order to denounce whoever he does not respect: “Any political party that can't cough up anything better than a treacherous brain-damaged old vulture like Hubert Humphrey deserves every beating it gets” (259). But Humphrey is not the only politician that is verbally chastised – also Ed Muskie, the governor of Maine, is not spared biting comments: “Sending Muskie against Nixon would have been like sending a three-toed sloth out to seize turf from a wolverine” (159). Although Dr. Thompson does not visualize Muskie as a reptile or predatory animal, but calling him a “three-toed sloth” does not demonstrate any respect.

Another person that receives his just deserts is Frank Mankiewicz, George McGovern's campaign manager and one of Thompson's most important campaign insiders. Due to Mankiewicz's sparing release of information, HST vents his anger by sliding into a tangent about how little he would care if “nine thugs had caught poor Frank in an alley near the Capitol and cut off both of his Big Toes” (221). For the length of two paragraphs, Dr. Thompson is lost in a fantastic story:

It is very hard to walk straight with the Big Toes gone; the effect is sort of like taking the keel off a sailboat – it becomes impossibly top-heavy, wallowing crazily in the swells, needing outriggers to hold it upright...and the only way a man can walk straight with no Big Toes is to use a very complex tripod mechanism, five or six retractable aluminum rods strapped to each arm, moving around like a *spider* [emphasis added] instead of a person (222).

In this mad vision, the narrator expresses his anger about Mankiewicz. The reader can imagine McGovern's press wizard being held upright by the “tripod mechanism” and

walking like a spider. For Grubb, “Thompson seeks to cripple the source of his frustration” by verbally attacking Mankiewicz (41). Dr. Thompson's language is aggressive and shows no understanding or mercy for the press official. He dislikes him and has no fear of expressing his perceptions. Hellmann explains that these violent frenzies “enable the persona [Dr. Thompson] mentally to confront events that he cannot actually alter” (97). Writing down violent words was the author’s only way to deal with the lack of information on the campaign.

It is interesting, though, that the animal references in *Campaign Trail* can be interpreted slightly different as the ones in *Vegas*. Whereas in *Vegas*, the perception of people as reptiles is drug-induced and hallucinated, the insults in *Campaign Trail* are not the result of an altered state of mind but rather picture the reporter's subjective visions of the politicians on the campaign. In *Vegas*, social criticism is mainly concealed behind Duke’s hallucinations and hidden between the lines. In *Campaign Trail*, Dr. Thompson is straightforward and frank about his perception of the political process. Similar to Raoul Duke, Dr. Thompson mostly indicates when he slides into a fantastic tale or a vision, for example, by saying “Ah...nightmares, nightmares. But I was only kidding” (417). The fantastic insertions are so exaggerated and weird that the reader cannot trust Dr. Thompson and remains skeptical, for example, with the Ibogaine story about Humphrey. Hellmann claims that “such passages function as sophisticated metafictional strategies emphasizing the status of the work as personal construct, and thus shifting its drama from the events reported to that of an individual consciousness's experiences of those events” (89). Thompson always informs his readers that his perceptions are highly subjective, often altered or at least keeps them skeptical. This factor reduces the importance of the question of “fact versus fiction” in Thompson's work because the reader is made aware of the level of truth that the journalist conveys

in his articles.

However, Thompson's narrators play an important role in his texts. They often are the center of attention in the action that evolves around them. The narrators never step aside and merely observe what is happening around them, but actively participate in the story and often *are* the story.

4.3 Buy the Ticket, Take the Ride

Thompson's journalistic writing distinguishes itself from, for example, the New Journalists through the high level of narrator participation. His speakers play important parts in the development of the stories and often suffer from the conditions in which they find themselves. The descriptions of these physical and mental conditions serve as a further tool to describe Thompson's perception of events.

In *Campaign Trail*, Dr. Thompson's bodily and mental state declines with the progressing campaign. He "openly discusses his methods and problems of composition" and keeps "a nearly constant focus upon his narrator's consciousness" (Hellmann 86ff.). In the book's February article, he explains: "The nut of the problem is that covering a presidential campaign is so fucking dull that it's just barely tolerable..." (95). A month later, the journalist's body is affected by stress: "The front half of my brain has been numb for ten days and my legs will no longer support me for more than two or three minutes at a time" (165). Dr. Thompson increasingly struggles with meeting the deadlines and explains how tough the writing process has become (see 169). He starts to write about the campaign, but diverges more and more into random tales and fantasy. He barely manages to return to the main subject of his articles, before he again loses concentration and clarity (see Hellmann 87). In one article, an inserted author's note describes that "when it finally became apparent that I [Dr. Thompson] was hopelessly

out of control, Crouse went out and lashed the story together on his own” and the article is completed with Tim Crouse's texts (171). Towards May, Dr. Thompson's condition is getting so serious that he begins “to wonder just how much longer I can stand it: this endless nightmare of getting up at the crack of dawn to go out and watch the candidate shake hands with workers” (184). In June, the book's and the campaign's peak, the journalist is close to a major freak out:

I am growing extremely weary of constantly writing about politics. My brain has become a steam-vat; my body is turning to wax and bad flab; impotence looms; my fingernails are growing at a fantastic rate of speed – they are turning into claws; my standard-size clippers will no longer cut the growth, so now I carry a set of huge toe-nail clippers and sneak off every night around dusk, regardless of where I am – in any city, hamlet, or plastic hotel room along the campaign trail – to chop another quarter of an inch or so off of all ten fingers.

People are beginning to notice, I think, but fuck them. I am beginning to notice some of *their* problems too (219ff.).

It appears as if the journalist were turning into a beast. The fact that he is growing claws and sneaks off at dusk like a werewolf specifies how and how much the campaign affects the reporter. The decline goes hand in hand with the progress of the campaign – after six months on the trail, he becomes an animal, similar to the people he writes about and like in *Vegas*, where Duke becomes a beast in order to deal with reality. Obviously, the corruption and greed Dr. Thompson witnesses on the campaign is taking its toll on him. Somehow, the reporter has to deal with his negative perceptions of events and people, and once more he participates in what he perceives and does not simply defame his fellow citizens. He includes himself in the mass of people that he

dislikes. The beast that he becomes represents the dark side of society that is reflected in every person. Corruption seems to spread like a virus and sooner or later also affects the ones that criticize it. The author indirectly highlights that it is crucial too keep the negative aspect of character in balance with the good ones. One should not speak idealistically and then act crookedly. Thompson repeatedly claimed that the main problem of America was there were too many people that tried to sell lies. In *Campaign Trail*, he underlines the fact that the country should have been “kept out of the hands of greedy little hustlers like Richard Nixon that through his violent actions and corrupt character has affected the American nation and the American Dream (*Campaign* 414). For Thompson, the American Dream was not only corrupted by politicians, but society – more importantly, the very same society that has developed the myth of the dream. The author represents similar ideas as the counterculture that argued that the American Dream was being killed by society and its dominant discourse. Only the mainstream dream was considered acceptable, whereas societal change and alternative lifestyle were mainly repressed. This repression, though, did not have the most beneficial effect on society as it led to protests, social upheavals and a very bad mood in the nation.

However, the portrayal of people as monsters is not the only method that Thompson uses to render his writing more vivid. Introducing journalistic elements, such as interview transcripts and editor’s notes, enable him to deepen his picture of the violent reality of America in the 70s.

4.3.1 In Other Words

In both books, Thompson inserted newspaper clippings, transcripts of interviews or tape recordings and editor's/author's notes in order to convey his perception of reality or support the arguments and theories he presented in his texts. For example, in *Vegas* he

indicates his state of terror and fear by reading articles from the *Las Vegas Sun* about killings by drug addicts, drug addicted GIs in the Vietnam War, torture techniques used by US army, a man shooting at people from a building and a pharmacy owner that is accused of illegally selling drugs. Hellmann mentions that “their [the articles] ‘objective’ prose stands in counterpoint to the book's agitated style” (78). After reading the newspaper, Duke states: “Reading the front page made me feel a lot better. Against that heinous background, my crimes were pale and meaningless” (74). He is horrified by what he reads in the newspaper but also relieved that actions, which are worse than his own behavior, were happening all over the US, and it makes him feel less guilty.

The author includes bulletins and notes in the text, for example, “YOU CAN RUN, BUT YOU CAN'T HIDE” and explains this as “a warning to smack dealers seen on a bulletin board in Boulder, Colo.” (85). He also adds a probably made-up bulletin “that used to be posted, in form of mimeographed bulletins, in Police Department locker rooms” (139). The first page of the *Las Vegas Sun* is full of terrifying articles and there are warning signs and notes everywhere. The origin of these texts is not very clear and therefore, cannot be trusted. However, their reliability is not as important as question why the author adds such notes to the text. Obviously, Thompson wanted to express his feelings not only through his narrator’s description of reality and his actions, but also mirror it in external source, for example, the newspaper. These fake headlines and notes complement Duke’s perception of America as they add another layer of information about the state of the nation and show that the “fear and loathing” does not only affect the narrator but also the public.

In chapter nine of *Vegas*, which is called “Breakdown on Paradise Blvd.”, the narration is interrupted by an editor's note that claims that “Dr. Duke appears to have broken down completely; the original manuscript is so splintered that we were forced to

seek out the original tape recording and transcribe it verbatim” (161). The entire chapter consists of a transcript of a conversation between Duke, Dr. Gonzo and employees of a taco stand in North Vegas about the American Dream and the Old Psychiatrist's Club that had burned down three years ago. By adding a transcript, the story becomes immediate and appears to be more realistic as it makes the reader believe that “it really happened like this”. It reinforces the author's truth claim and helps to diminish the reader's doubt about the accuracy of the story.

Nevertheless, sometimes the origin of these insertions is questionable. In *Vegas*, for example, Duke reads a horrifying article that does not sound like a regular newspaper article but like one written by Thompson himself, for example: “...after five crewmen including the Captain were diced up like Pineapple meat in a brawl with the Heroin Police at the neutral port of Hong Sea” (200). Furthermore, Duke does not indicate a source and the article is too frantic to be published in a mainstream newspaper. The Captain's name, Dr. Bloor, mentioned in the article, is one that the author used in other stories as well. This report therefore appears to be a mock article as the author criticizes the press as “a gang of cruel faggots” right after reading it (200). However, it serves the purpose to express the author's dismay of the mainstream press as for him they failed to properly report events, for example, the Vietnam War or the race riots.

In *Campaign Trail*, newspaper clippings help Dr. Thompson to portray the political situation by which he is surrounded so that he can focus on his own analysis and does not need to describe much of the actual ongoing. He starts his articles with excerpts from newspapers and then gives his personal opinion of the incident and uses them as a bridge to his own observations. On page 82 of *Campaign Trail*, he includes a message

to Larry O'Brien, the National Democratic Party chairman, in which Dr. Thompson first argues that the recipient had falsely promised him the appointment as Governor of American Samoa and then diverges into an informal analysis and negative prediction of O'Brien's fate in this election. He uses the letter to make a political prediction in a more personalized way by directly addressing the party's national chairperson.

To support the story about the “Boohoo incident” that has already been mentioned, Dr. Thompson adds an article by the *Miami Herald* from February 20, 1972 that names him as the journalist who had given his press credentials to the hecklers. Through the article, he introduces the story and proves that he did not simply invent it and then recounts how it has happened that someone got hold of his press badge. In the story, Dr. Thompson invents a headline saying “I could see the headlines in every newspaper from Key West to Seattle: Muskie Campaign Trail Collision Kills 34; Demo Candidate Blames ‘Crazy Journalist’” after asking why the train had not been stopped in order to dispatch the heckler who had Thompson’s badge (106). Not only does the headline convey Dr. Thompson's random paranoia, but also his opinion about himself as he calls himself a “crazy journalist”.

To support his Ibogaine rumor about Muskie, the author includes an excerpt from a study by PharmChem Laboratories, Palo Alto that is of uncertain origin, and is supposed to reduce the doubt about the following story about Humphrey's addiction. Thompson also communicates his dismay of the politician by adding first adding this text and then referring to Big Ed – already the act of putting drug abuse and a presidential candidate into the same context does not necessarily convey a positive image of the politician.

In the May article, Dr. Thompson switches into “the straight Gonzo mode” by including the unedited notes from his notebook. The sentences are short and

fragmented, specific times and numbers are listed and the text is difficult to understand as it lacks explanations and background information. It nevertheless communicates the immediacy and stress of the campaign that Dr. Thompson perceives and expresses in his articles.

The author also adds two poems to *Campaign Trail*. The first, an excerpt from Francois Villon's "Ballade du Concours de Blois", appears at the beginning of the June article and serves as vanguard to the sense of fear and doom that the author communicates in the following article:

In my own country I am in a far-off land.
 I am strong but have no force or powerlessness
 I win all yet remain a loser
 At break of day I say goodnight
 When I lie down I have a great fear of falling (219).

Although the poem opens the article, the narrator does not refer to it until later in the text when he summarizes that "a sense of doomed alienation on your own turf is nothing new" (225). At this point of the narration, Dr. Thompson appears to be frustrated with the process of the campaign. He is evidently annoyed by writing about events and therefore uses several interview transcripts and newspaper articles to describe what happens and just comments them or diverges into tangents to avoid writing about the presidential campaign. Similar to *Vegas*, an editor's note claiming that "Dr. Thompson suffered a series of nervous seizures" appears and the stories is being told through interview transcripts (422).

On the last page of the November article, the second poem "Be Angry at the Sun" by Robinson Jeffers is introduced in order to describe the author's disillusionment with Nixon's reelection. Dr. Thompson is so affected by the outcome that he is not able

to express his feelings in his own words: Before the poem, he inserts excerpts of a story that, as he claims, was abandoned in a typewriter. For him, it summarized “the feeling of most of the press about the McGovern campaign” (454). The inserted text looks like it has been proofread, as there are various corrections and changes. The style and tone is definitely not Dr. Thompson's and the source of this text is unknown. Nevertheless, it expresses exactly the disappointment Dr. Thompson and the other McGovern fans felt after the election.

Jeffer's poem “Be Angry At the Sun”, which is separated from the November article and marks the end of the campaign, expresses Thompson's disappointment with the political process in his native country:

That public men publish falsehoods
Is nothing new. That America must accept
Like the historical republics corruption and empire
Has been known for years.

Be angry at the sun for setting
If these things anger you. Watch the wheel slope
and turn,
They are all bound on the wheel, these people,
This republic. Europe Asia...(458).³⁹

Throughout the campaign, Dr. Thompson has referred to similar problems and grievances as Jeffers. Something is very “wrong” in America and few people seem to understand and care about it. The narrator perceives the nation as doomed after Nixon's reelection. He also argues that the Presidents repeated success is a logical consequence

³⁹ This is only an excerpt to exemplify the poem's nature.

of the social unrest of the 60s. People wanted a leader that could bring the nation back on course and George McGovern was not perceived as the right person to achieve this.

Dr. Thompson ends his book with further interviews with, for example, George McGovern in order to do a debriefing of the campaign. His final article called “Epitaph” has little to do with the campaign except for some weird thoughts Dr. Thompson communicates after reading a McDonald's advertisement, one of Nixon 's big supporters in the campaign, which asserts that

Nothing in the world can take the place of persistence. Talent will not: Nothing is more common than unsuccessful men with talent are. Genius will not: Unrewarded genius is almost a proverb. Education alone will not: the world is full of educated derelicts. Persistence and determination alone are omnipotent (505).

Dr. Thompson interprets this advertisement as a sign for something that he does not explain to his readers. Aroused by it, he calls Mankiewicz, who says, “Keep your own counsel. Don't draw any conclusions from anything you see or hear” (505). As mentioned above, Thompson then relaxes and goes to the Loser's club. What he exactly tries to convey with these observations is not clear but it reflects his chagrin over the campaign's outcome and his suspicion and dismay of Nixon. One can also agree with Hellmann who claims that the McDonald's ad “presents the lesson Dr. Thompson has learned while on the campaign trail: the world is too permeated by false appearance, conspiracy, and delusion for one to trust the evidence of his senses” (99).

Thompson used these journalistic elements to refer to the world outside of his articles and stories. They enable him to express his feelings and perceptions of the world. They also make his text immediate and should make the reader less skeptical about the level of truth in Thompson's stories. In *Campaign Trail*, they sometimes

substitute Thompson's own writing when he is too stressed to produce a lengthy text himself. Even if some of them are pure inventions, they nevertheless help the author to communicate what how he perceives the campaign.

4.3.2 Jesus! Another Deadline Missed...

The constant struggle with deadlines and the typewriter become central points in *Campaign Trail* that tell the reader not only how the campaign works but also how stressful the American political process is for the press. An additional layer of information is provided by the insertion of Dr. Thompson's descriptions of the writing process and his struggles with getting his work done before the deadline. These reports complement the general mood of madness in the author's texts and give insight to Thompson's writing procedure, for example, by showing how difficult and tiring covering the campaign can be.

In the February article, Dr. Thompson complains about the stress caused by the huge amount of traveling that the campaign involves: “The public expects no less. They want a man who can zap around the nation like a goddamn methedrine bat: Racing from airport to airport, from one crisis to another- sucking up the news and then spewing it out by the “Five W's” in a package that makes perfect sense” (93). In this passage, he furthermore criticizes public expectations about journalists who should be able to report and make sense of everything by answering the five W-questions.

Two months later, the narrator starts to explain the pressure caused by deadlines: “We seem to have wandered off again, and this time, I can't afford the luxury of raving at great length about anything that slides into my head. So, rather than miss another deadline, I want to zip up the nut with a fast and extremely pithy 500 words...” (100). In this quote, Dr. Thompson thematizes his own writing style – he admits that he easily

diverges into lengthy tangents and misses deadlines due to his intense way of researching and writing. According to Grubb, Thompson's articles often are like “a jigsaw puzzle, with the episodes adding up to form a larger picture of Thompson's claustrophobic rage” on the campaign, which also explains how he composes his work (40). Dr. Thompson often appears to be sick of writing about the campaign and therefore digresses into random tales whose composition he enjoys more.

In the same article, he repeats the deadline problem and his aversion to write about politics: “Well...I'd like to run this story all the way out, here, but it's deadline time again and the nuts & bolts people are starting to moan...demanding a fast finish and heavy on the *political stuff*. Right. Let's not cheat the readers. We promised them politics, by God, and we'll damn well *give* them politics” (109). After this short stream of consciousness-like insertion, the narrator returns to the Boohoo incident. It appears as if he had to remind himself to concentrate and not diverge into tangents. This method of composition, that is the alternation of politically relevant passages and totally irrelevant tangents, helps the writer to create the immediacy his writing style needs.

The closer the end of the primaries comes, the more stressed Dr. Thompson appears to be. In the April article, he dedicates a full page to his discomfort with the work and deadlines: “And now the bastard [the fax machine] is beeping ... beeping ... beeping, which means it is hungry for this final page, which means I no longer have the time to crank out any real wisdom on the meaning of the Wisconsin primary” (169). In May, Dr. Thompson is already close to the nervous breakdown he suffers later:

This is about the thirteenth lead I've written for this goddamn mess, and they are getting progressively worse...which hardly matters now because we are down to the deadline again and it will not be long before the Mojo Wire [fax machine] starts beeping and the phones start ringing and those

thugs out in San Francisco will be screaming for Copy. Words! Wisdom!
Gibberish! (184)

Dr. Thompson criticizes himself and his writing style and expresses his despair with the campaign and his work. Through the usage of the first person plural pronoun the author includes the reader into the action in order to make him understand the stress and pressure he perceives on the campaign. His tangents and diversions from the topic and low self-esteem render the text turbulent. He refers to himself in a negative way, describing his work as gibberish or failure (see 185). He constantly reminds his audience of the incredible stress that he has to endure that makes him miss deadlines. After the peak of the campaign in June, these complaints decrease and become less important in the text. It is as if Dr. Thompson withdraws from further emotional involvement in the campaign in anticipation of McGovern's loss and Nixon's reelection. In the later articles, he uses more interview transcripts and his tone becomes more pessimistic due to his negative expectations about the election's outcome.

By discussing the writing process and the strain of the campaign in his articles, Thompson manages to make the stress, from which he is suffering, concrete for the readers. It also affects his writing style inasmuch as the writing process becomes more immediate and *gonzo*.

A parallel can be drawn between the effect of drugs on Raoul Duke in *Vegas* and the effects of the campaign on Dr. Thompson- the effects of the drugs and the campaign bring both narrators to nervous breakdowns and seizures. Dr. Thompson admits that “junkies don't laugh much; their gig is too serious – and the politics junkie is not much different on that score than a smack junkie” (266). These effects emphasize the mad, violent and dark side of the narrators and communicate the “fear and loathing” they are experiencing. But madness and violence are not only present in the narrators but also in

most of the people with whom they are confronted. The “fear and loathing” is described as looming over the whole nation and affecting everyone, from the outlaw journalist to the President.

All the layers of information, which the author weaves into his texts, help him to reconstruct the atmosphere and mood of certain events. The reader is constantly reminded that these impressions are purely subjective and do not necessarily need to be true. Thompson experiences them and expresses them in his own words in order to make sense of it. The narrators serve as tools to exculpate Thompson from his bold statements, he can hide behind them and no one can sue him for what they say. Additionally, they allow him to criticize the society without stepping aside. They attack the same things they commit themselves – they lie, steal, cheat and are corrupt. Thompson is right when he says, “you can run, but you can't hide” from the violent side of American society as it reflected in everyone. And what affects American society affects the American Dream and vice versa.

Conclusion

Hunter Thompson had high expectations for his country. He believed in the American system and American democracy as for him the country could have been a monument to humanity, a place where people “were not fixed in their circumstances of birth, but were free to become whatever they could imagine” (Delbanco 61). For him, America was the country where people could live their lives without being harassed by others based on the citizens' rights that were protected. Nevertheless, he saw democracy falling apart due to the Vietnam War, the killings of so many important leaders and the difficulties the government had with dealing with social upheavals. He, like so many others during the late 60s, lost faith in the righteousness of the democracy that once was a “symbol of hope” that promised “universal rights” and “the justness of the law and government” (Delbanco 68). It was as if his native country was going in the wrong direction and although so many people were fighting for a change, it was hopeless. Thompson observed this hopelessness and frustration among his fellow citizens and expressed it in his texts. He identified the wrongdoers that had led the nation closer to the abyss and exposed them through his writing by transforming them into predatory animals that were fueled by greed and corruption. Delbanco argues that “what Christianity and democracy”, both factors that are important in American culture, “share is the idea that to live in a purely instrumental relation with other human beings, to exploit and then discard them, is to give in entirely to the *predatory instinct* [emphasis added] and to leave unmet the need for fellowship and reciprocity” (91). It is exactly what Thompson meant when he referred to the “ugly fallout of the American Dream” - the victory of the predatory and evil forces among men and women. This is what he meant when he referred to the dark and violent side of American society.

Delbanco argues that the change of the public mood in the late 60s was a result

of the fact that “the civil religion reached a death-climax” - “Something died, or at least fell dormant between the later 1960s, when the reform impulse subsided into solipsism, and the 1980s” (96). It was the appreciation and belief in the government and the righteousness of the American system. Since the development of the American Dream has always been linked to the evolution of the United States as a nation, it is clear that some labeled the pessimism of the late 60s and 70s as the “death of the American Dream”. Participation in the government process declined rapidly and has ever since been lower than it used to be. People engaged in drugs, sex and whatever new trend promised the healing of the lack of hope for a better future, and the state was not able to spread much hope.

However, despair and melancholy are inevitable byproducts of the possibility of hope – where there is a shadow, there also is a light (see Delbanco 83). The “fear of a fallout of the American Dream” has existed since the Puritan landfall; it constitutes a fundamental part of the American discourse. It embodies the other side of the American Dream that has inspired a great many authors to write some of the most important classics of American literature. Hunter S. Thompson is one of them.

The main goal of this thesis was to analyze Hunter S. Thompson's critique of the American Dream that has helped many people to make sense of many events that occurred during the 1960s. I attempted to show that the journalist constantly engaged the American Dream in his work by first positioning him as a writer, by explaining the concept of the American Dream, by analyzing Thompson's books *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail '72* and highlighting the symbols, themes and methods that he incorporated in his work. The main aim was not so much to investigate if the American Dream had died for Thompson, but to exhibit

that this myth was an essential element in his work that inspired him to write famous and insightful passages.

During the research and the writing process, I dealt with several issues that made writing this study a demanding task. First, I had to understand the American Dream - a concept so vast that I had difficulties to decide which aspects I should include and which could be excluded. It was also difficult to comprehend what the American Dream actually meant to Hunter S. Thompson, as he never explicitly named what this concept signified to him. Here, the interviews with William McKeen and Max Stites were very fruitful and I hereby want to again express my gratitude for their cooperativeness.

What I have realized in the course of my research and writing is that Thompson's writing cannot be labeled and categorized because his style is too manifold and comprises different genres. He fuses various different methods and styles so that he can be called an outlaw writer who broke all rules, from those of conventional journalism to those of the innovative New Journalists.

It became also clear to me that the American Dream is a broad narrative that has been invented and re-invented by many different people in different times. The Dream has also always been connected to American democracy and the notion of freedom. In the 1960s, people, especially the ones who were affiliated with the counterculture, lost their faith in the American system due the various problems for which the authorities had little solutions at hand. Melancholy, disillusionment and withdrawal from the political life became markers of the time after 1969.

Hunter Thompson described exactly the fact that many people were torn between the belief in traditional American values and the reality that did not correspond with them. He used some classical symbols of American literature that are linked to the American Dream, for example, the idea of the frontier and Christian morality, and

thereby conveys his perception of the American reality in the 60s and 70s. The texts feature a vivid imagery and many journalistic devices that helped to recreate the sense of alienation the author felt. At the end of *Campaign Trail*, it appears as if Hunter Thompson had lost his belief in the American system, as he felt betrayed when a great majority reelected Richard Nixon. For him, Nixon's reelection probably signified the Death of the American Dream.⁴⁰

This thesis could definitely have been much longer than it is. Further topics that could have been included are closer analyses of Thompson's narrators who also serve as protagonists in his stories. Another interesting aspect in Thompson's work is the self-fashioning and self-dramatization of the writer in his characters, Raoul Duke and Dr. Hunter S. Thompson. One could also deal with Thompson's political commentary and investigate his work from a journalistic point of view. Personally, I am also interested in the change of style and tone in Thompson's later works as compared to his early publications, as well as the deep and dark humor that appears in all his texts.

In general, I can say that my fascination with the late writer was intensified by the long and passionate occupation with his work. I can definitely recommend his stories of fear and loathing as they make you think and laugh at the same time, which is a quality that, in my opinion, has not been achieved by a great many writers.

⁴⁰ However, it is important to acknowledge that the American Dream remained a recurrent theme in Thompson's writings until his suicide in 2005.

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Appendixes

A) Transcripts of Personal Interviews with William McKeen and Max Stites

Transcript of Interview with William McKeen

14 May 2009

via Skype

[...]

Maier: Where would you position HST's work? Did he write fiction or fictional journalism? Was he a New Journalist? Or was he a gonzo journalist? Or an Outlaw Journalist?

McKeen: I'd say he was a gonzo journalist, which I think is by definition an outlaw journalist. He is someone who always puts himself front and center, so that makes him almost a journalist of the old school and by old school I mean, oh I don't know, 18th century...because people like...James Boswell, who followed around Samuel Johnson for 20 years. He was a journalist in the sense that he was keeping a journal, a public journal that he shared and that's what Hunter Thompson did. So I think he is a...in some ways I could make an argument that he was a pure journalist...not someone who works for the New York Times because the person who works for the New York Times is limited by having to...filter out opinion, whereas Hunter was, you know, you knew exactly where he stood and his version of events often was colored or almost always was colored by what he felt.

Maier: I wouldn't consider him a New Journalist...in the sense of what Tom Wolfe did...

McKeen: No, when he always said the problem with Tom Wolfe is that he, he felt he had to stand back and observe. Yeah,well, Hunter called him „a crusty observer.“ Hunter wasn't that way.

Maier: It brings me also to the question; I'm looking at the idea of counterculture and dominant culture. And, when I did my reading, I was wondering if HST was a child of the counterculture, the 1960s American counterculture to be precise, because in my opinion, he is. Somehow you can feel that he is on a counter position, but still he is not a part of the general counte culture that was going on in the 1960s in America.

McKeen: Well, he was, the way he was before the counter culture. And so I think it was probably by the time he was living in Haight-Ashbury and within the heart of that area of the birth of the counterculture, I think he probably was fully formed. So I think it probably didn't affect him in terms of forming his attitudes, or his approach to his writing. I think it may have reaffirmed his attitude because...he is not a product of the counterculture, but I see him as sort of being, in some ways a good example of a counter culture.

Maier: So he presents some sort of counter discourse?

McKeen: Right.

Maier: More a counter discourse than a counter culture.

McKeen: Right.

Maier: To come to the American Dream, he engages the American Dream constantly throughout his work. What do you think it meant or constituted for him?

McKeen: Well, I think to most people the American Dream is thought of in terms of the classic story we're told growing up that, you know, any kid can rise from nothing and become successful, you know, the American Dream, you can start with nothing and end up as a millionaire, that any child could grow up to be president. And I don't think that is part of Hunter's definition of the American Dream. I believe his definition of the American Dream was just the...just being left alone. And nobody fucking with him. I think he just wanted to be left alone, to blow up his propane tanks, to fire his guns, to sit naked on his porch, he just wanted to be left alone.

When I interviewed, just about everyone I interviewed for the book, I said „What do you think the American Dream was to Hunter Thompson and what is the American Dream to you?“ Almost all of them had some variation on that, but the one that said that was their dream, the freedom to be left alone, was Sonny Barger, the Hell's Angels. And I thought he was right on the money, when he said, you know, „My American Dream is to get on my motorcycle, with my woman or wife or whatever, I think this is in the book, and just ride down the highway and not be bothered, not to be hassled by the cops, just to enjoy life“, and he said „I don't believe we have freedom like that anymore“. And that was the way Hunter felt, and that was probably or part of the reason that he killed himself, that he felt that he was so alien in this country in the months after George Bush's reelection. So I think that's what the American Dream meant to Hunter.

Maier: So, I think you can call him a critic of the American Dream.

McKeen: Right. One more thing - I should say is that in addition to this pursuit of rising from nothing and then having everything - I think another aspect of the American Dream today, and particularly with young people, is they see the American Dream is sort of seen as the delirious pursuit of fame, fame for no other reason except for to be famous, and not to be famous, I think this is why you have crazy people like Mark David Chapman or people who come along to become famous by killing, I think they will take the fame however they get it. At least that's my impression. So I think that those are two aspects to the American Dream that Hunter would have disdained, the rags to riches and also the one that's purely all about fame.

Maier: He made jokes on Horatio Alger. I think this is also a sort of dismissal of the from rags to riches story.

McKeen: Yes.

Maier: That brings me to *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, since it is called „A savage journey into the heart of the American Dream.“ But what is the American Dream in this novel, or how is it described?

McKeen: Well, I don't think he knows why...what he is looking for...when he is..in Las Vegas. He knows that...I think I really came to appreciate on a different level when I learned more about his life and that he was struggling that whole time, the late Sixties, early Seventies, struggles have come up with or was to write a book called the Death of the American Dream. And the fact that he couldn't do it, it was the bane of his existence. And so he went to Las Vegas, he went there just to write a, he went there obviously to interview Oscar Acosta, for that other story he was doing. But he wrote the Vegas thing more or less as an exercise, as a way to, sort of keep limber, I don't think he had any commercial purpose for it. He even says on some occasion that he didn't even realize what he was putting into it until it was all over. So that's when he looked at it, having finished it, he looked back at it and realized that he had kind of dealt with that theme of the death of the American Dream, but he didn't do it in a ponderous way – he would have, if he had written a book by that title – what he did was, he had sort of laid everything between the lines. And I think that this was his kind of a joke, whenever the phone rings around the house, it could be Hollywood, it is just sort of a joke. And this was kind of his thing, like, we'll let's go and look for the American Dream at the Burger

King, let's go look for the American Dream at the mall, and so he was making a joke about looking for the American Dream. And it's a joke he'd even play out in front of the people of the taco stand. But it ends up not being a joke, like you know, the American Dream can't be found. It's nothing you can ever locate...

Maier: ..find it in the literal sense.

McKeen: Yes.

Maier: But the description itself, what the characters are seeing there, isn't it more like an American Nightmare? At least from his point of view?

McKeen: Well, I think so, I think it is a nightmare, what he is describing and then, this is what happens when you have everything. People run them up, and they do stupid things. And I don't know, I'm sure that that's not what he was looking for.

Maier: Yes. I was wondering why it was exactly Las Vegas, this town so many more meanings, he just added, he gave another perspective on Las Vegas. Do you think it was kind of intended to take Las Vegas, for this story, or it just happened accidentally in the course, that he went there, was there and all just happened this way?

McKeen: Well, I think it's accidental and I think it's also anticipated...I think he had this assignment to go and cover that race in Las Vegas and I don't think he went there, thinking that something great would come of it. But I think the fact that Las Vegas, at that time, was only about 20 years old, it had just risen out of the desert and it was purely manufactured and fake. And I think that that was probably, why he thought, subconsciously at first, and then later on consciously, thought of it as representative of the vacuity of the American Dream, that there was nothing there. This whole city was fake. The grass, you know. wouldn't grow there if they hadn't irrigated it. It was entirely artifice. And Las Vegas in 1971 is different from Las Vegas of today, Las Vegas today is both, gambling mecca, but it is also a tourist mecca, where you see people with their families. Back then it was just primarily a playground, and there wasn't much to it. Now it is one of the fastest growing cities in America, a very popular destination for regular vacations, so it was a little different then. I think people today can still appreciate in the way he described it and intended it.

Maier: So you can somehow compare Las Vegas to the myth of the American Dream that has been constructed over the years, with Las Vegas being constructed as this

dream city.

McKeen: Why?

Maier: There is the possibility there that the dream can come true. Like this myth, sticking with Las Vegas, that you can go there not having any money or anything, and you can come back and be a millionaire.

McKeen: And there is also this feeling that not only you could win money that way, and that's the American Dream or you could somehow be discovered because it is such an entertainment mecca and then someone will make you famous. I really think that the American Dream in the sense of dream, dream of delirious fame, I think that is something Hunter found kind of repulsive.

Maier: John Hellmann, he argues that *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* consists of two parts: The first part is characterized by the fear and hallucinatory reality Duke and Dr. Gonzo encounter in Las Vegas. And the second, is marked by the general feeling of loathing since Duke has turned into a beast himself in order to survive in the savage environment he finds himself. Do you agree with this opinion? Why did the character somehow turn in to a beast?

McKeen: I don't know. I never saw it that way. I know it was written in two hefty chunks and there may be a difference in tone that's related to the fact that there was about a month and a half in between writing part I and writing part II. I think a lot of what we ascribe to Fear and Loathing was not intended. I think it was entirely accidental. I think it all came out of Hunter's subconscious. So I don't really see it that way. So I don't know if I necessarily disagree or agree with that. I don't feel strongly enough to comment.

Maier: Do you think Raoul Duke is some sort of self-caricature of the real Hunter S. Thompson?

McKeen: There is no doubt about that. I think that...have you heard the gonzo tapes?

Maier: No, I haven't yet.

McKeen: If you listen to Hunter and Oscar, or just Hunter alone, talking into the tape machine, they sound like reasonable people. The whole scene at the taco stand, is available on the Gonzo tapes. And I think that Raoul Duke was always an enhanced version of reality. And as you know, I think, that became kind of a yoke around his neck, he became a prisoner of that persona. I think Raoul Duke ended up being a

convenient way to tell the story and in fact it was originally published under the name of Raoul Duke. So I think it was a way of him, kind of disguising himself, creating a character. Raoul Duke was a name he had used as far back as, when he worked in the air force, we would invent this character and if he wanted someone to say something that he could quote but no one would say that, then he would use Raoul Duke. So I think it was always part of his psyche, or he was his alter ego.

Maier: The second book I analyze is the *Fear and Loathing: On the Campaign Trail*, and there the persona you get in the text, is Dr. Hunter S. Thompson. Is he closer to the real HST than Raoul Duke?

McKeen: I believe that that is probably much more like Hunter, the character in that book. And he, at least he claimed to stayed off a lot of more elaborate drugs, while he was doing that book. I think he was only drinking and maybe taking speed. So I think this is more like the real Hunter. The crazy guy, ripping up a demo strip and throwing up on everybody, I think this was partly invention. In *Campaign Trail*, he didn't have to manufacture any frenzy or excitement because it was already there, it was part of the nature of the campaign.

Maier: Do you think that HST continued his description of the state of American Dream and the American Dream in "F&L: On the Campaign Trail"?

McKeen: I think it is too, a, I agree with you. I think it is a book where he starts off being cynical. He falls in love in a way with a candidate, a person he thinks is just superbly moral...and then that guy, George McGovern, ends up breaking his heart. Because he thinks that McGovern just mismanages his own campaign and then the, or maybe it isn't McGovern that breaks his heart, maybe it is the country that breaks his heart when McGovern doesn't win. I think it is almost a romance book, but it is about a man who is in love with his country rather than a woman in love with a man, or a man in love with a woman. I kind of see it that way. Therefore, it is a tragic book, because his heart is broken at the end, he is, emotionally at least, he is dead. And I think it remains a great book. Probably it's the worst titled great book I've ever read. I hate the title of that book. I wish they'd called it something else. And have even talked to the estate about putting together all of Hunter's political writing, including that book in its entirety, and publishing it as one big omnibus. I think that'd be a wonderful service to humanity.

Maier: Do you agree that Thompson used his humor to fight off the horrible reality he faced? Like by turning all major politicians into leeches, snakes, and poison toads?

McKeen: I think even in his darkest moments, Hunter couldn't help about being funny. He was a very funny man. And there was usually a lot of bitterness behind his humor.

Maier: So he used his humor to step back and try not to be that bitter?

McKeen: Right.

Maier: Do you agree with the idea that Thompson turned Nixon into some sort of American Adam?

McKeen: An American Adam?

Maier: The American Adam is number one American character, like the American white male that has all the possibility to do something good, American Dream figure, but as Adam implies, there is always the fall. He describes Nixon as some sort of American Adam, in the sense that Nixon had the possibility but he falls, in the biblical sense of Adam.

McKeen: You know, I don't know. I would say no, I think that...Hunter thought that Nixon was not only born corrupt, but that he was conceived corrupt. So that his corruption even predates birth. And my feeling about Nixon was that he really was a muse for Hunter because he, the hatred of Nixon, inspired Hunter's greatest writing. And Nixon to him showed that it was the American Dream that, here was a guy who rose from nothing and he rose to be president of the U.S., and he was a filthy skunk. So there is the traditional of the American Dream for you – so I would say no, he never saw him that way.

Maier: If you read Hunter's early publications and compare them to his texts in e.g.: the 1980s, his tone had changed to a more disillusioned, cynical attitude and, quoting him, “there's no fun in it” anymore. Do you think there has been a major change in his perception of America and also the American Dream?

McKeen: One thing I think that happened to him was that he became too famous to be a reporter anymore and I think that rather than being out among the people and hanging out with them and seeing them up close and talking to them, he saw the synthetic America on television because he became not just a prisoner of his own persona but a

prisoner of fame to the extent that wherever he went he was more famous than anything or anyone he covered. And so, he, the state of his career crossroads at a time when cable television really came into being, so he would just watch CNN and all the other networks all the time. And that was what formed his impression of America. So I consider that a synthetic America because it is not real, it's packaged in a theatrical way to make it good television, and I think that that may have colored his view of things. Now that isn't to say that what he wrote in the second part of his career when he wasn't a reporter, but was sort of a reactor to what he saw on television, it's not to say that that still wasn't interesting or in some cases right on the money. But I think his perceptions were at that time so colored by the fact that he was a) watching TV, b) hearing about things second hand from his friends and c) his friends by this time, were in many cases celebrities themselves like Jack Nicholson, and then later on Johnny Depp and John Cusack and so forth. And they also didn't, they weren't out there among the people because they too were sort of prisoners to their own fame. So I think he became more isolated and that affected his view of the world.

Maier: This mythical haze can also be found around Hunter, which comes from his character Raoul Duke. Where does this mythical aspect of HST's personas come from and did he use it well aware of its effects? That he made himself bigger than life?

McKeen: I think he did make himself bigger than life. And I think it became easy for him to be that character, easier for him to be this character than to do something more original. And I think part of it was that he wanted his readers, his fans to be happy. And he knew that's what they wanted. Even if it wasn't what he wanted to do. He knew that's what his fans wanted. And so I think he was kind of torn because I think he did want to try and break out and do something different and at the same time, he thought "Well, if I can get away with this, and if this is what people want, why should I try?" And although later in his life, he came to regret that, it did pay off. He is a very well known character in American popular culture and even people who don't read, know who he is, who he was.

Maier: For some people, Hunter S. Thompson was a left-wing radical who wrote nonsense, others called him an idealist who followed certain notions of what he considered right or wrong, similar to the ones of the Founding Fathers, and criticized

the things that were going wrong? What do you think he was?

McKeen: I think more along the lines of your second option there. I think he was in his way extremely patriotic, and really believed in those handwritten government documents, and believed that the Founding Fathers meant what they said about freedom, the freedom to speak, the freedom to assemble, the right to bear arms, I mean he took it literally. And I would consider that a very traditional patriot. Now people would be, they would find it odd for me to call him traditional, but I believe he was.

Maier: I totally agree with you on that. What makes his voice so particular in the chorus of the social and political critics in the US and also worldwide?

McKeen: Well, his voice was really unusual. I was with one of Hunter's friends the other day, Curtis Wilkie, and he was one of the "boys on the bus". And Curtis asked me, he is from Mississippi, he talks like this, "Who is the writer from whom you have learned the most?" And I thought, well from Hunter Thompson, I think what I have learned was go with it. He wrote things in his language with his point of view, he didn't stop to explain to people or to give them a hand down, he just went with it.

Maier: "Buy the ticket, take the ride."

McKeen: Yes, exactly.

Maier: The topic of my thesis is "Hunter S. Thompson and the Death of the American Dream" - Scholar Dr. Max Stites, who wrote a paper on "Dickens, Thompson and the American Dream", argued that in the course of his research he started by looking for a dead American Dream in Hunter's works but didn't find it. Do you think Thompson saw the American Dream as something that was and is dying, or even dead, or is it still functioning? Was there still some hope in Hunter?

McKeen: I think he saw he saw it as something that was dying. The fact that he could live the way he lived, and get always with it for the most part, meant that it was still alive. However, you know that he was busted in 1990, the law was always after him, so he knew it was in danger. But I think he thought it was still here and still with us.

Maier: If you read his texts and try to read between the lines, there is always somewhere this notion of hope? Do you think that, also considering his death, do you think there was still hope left, or did he give up?

McKeen: I think he gave up. I mean, I obviously wasn't there, but his friends say that

after President Bush's reelection in 2004, the lights just kind of went out. And he no longer told jokes, and he was very moody, so I think that was the last straw, I think he didn't ever shake that off. And a lot of people say that he'd be happy about Obama. You know, the guy was unpredictable. I don't know if he would, I'm not saying that he would have any major issues with him, it's just that I read enough about him to know that he, you couldn't ever predict him. And he may have had some very weird, some strange and unusual take of a political situation today, and may have already turned on Obama, even if he started the administration liking Obama. It's hard to say. I don't think he liked politicians as a breed.

Maier: I think that's kind of obvious in his work.

McKeen: Yeah. I mean the only person I think he really liked was George McGovern, I think that was the politician he most respected. But that's not to say that there were many politicians who gave McGovern a run for the money. I think the rest of them were just vile to Hunter.

Interview with Dr. Max Stites

18 June 2009

via Skype

Maier: Where would you personally position HST's work? Would say that he wrote fiction or fictional journalism? Was he a New Journalist? Was he a gonzo journalist or an Outlaw Journalist?

Stites: He definitely quoted this Gonzo journalism label; I think partly as an attempt to distinguish from other New Journalists he had affinities with; people like Tom Wolfe who he definitely criticized; not so much criticized but tried to differentiate himself when he said that Wolfe's problem is that he does not participate in his stories.

Outlaw journalist, for sure, might be a bit more accurate given his celebration of this...how fictional it was is sometimes hard to tell, the drug taking and also the other more extreme behaviors. It's one of those questions I've wrestled with a lot in terms of how fictional it actually is because his idea of the fiction or the fictional elements he did include is that they spoke to a much larger version of the truth than maybe traditional tabulation of statistics and facts that more traditional journalism would deal with. So in

that respect I would have to settle on the Gonzo journalist label for a lack of a better one, even though I think he felt a bit trapped by that and the kind of attention he got; later in his career especially when people did not make a distinction between him and a character, a composite figure like Raoul Duke.

Maier: I try to position him and it is pretty tough. You cannot squeeze him into any kind of genre.

Stites: I don't think his work really fits with a genre. I had conversations with people that say he was some sort of strange modernist...who has kind of taken off from people he idolized like Hemingway and Fitzgerald. He does defy categorization. I think he was somebody who turned to journalism but there's evidence of him being a very frustrated fiction writer.

Maier: I was wondering if HST was a child of the counterculture, the 1960s American counterculture to be precise, because in my opinion, he was. Somehow you can feel that he was on a counter position, but still he was not a part of the general counterculture. I always got the feeling that he distanced himself from the counterculture or some aspects of the counterculture.

Stites: I think you are right there. And I think that is one of the things that people miss. Given the time that he spent in Haight-Ashbury in the 60s and his association with certain people and then later with the Rolling Stone, let's just assume that he was not a child of the counterculture but a poster child of it. And he did have some real affinities with some of the political possibilities that people have seen in, this idea of challenging the status-quo and the established authorities – that being said though, I do not think he ever really saw himself as anything other than a very independent American, in certain ways there has been a confusion, he did not neatly fit into one of these 1960s countercultural boxes - yes, he liked to take drugs, yes, he had problems with the different presidential administrations, he certainly did not like Nixon and that leads over to the 70s, but he was too much of an individualist of his own person to really be „just a hippy“ or „just another Beatnik“. And obviously in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* he expresses a real kind of mourning for the passing of that 60s counterculture, the famous “wave-passage”, and he kind of identifies himself loosely (with the counterculture), he talks of being able to go out at night with his motorcycle and find people who were just as crazy and twisted as he was. But he is not saying, „we're all exactly the same, we're

all part of the same tribe“. So again, I think he is defying categories, so you get the problem, partly because of his popular image. We just assume he was this great radical 60s figure, when actually he was more of an individualist and...I think perhaps he was a bit politically naive, so he did not necessarily draw distinctions himself as carefully as he might have at times which blows the issue more so.

Maier: To come to the American Dream; he engages the American Dream constantly throughout his work. What do you think it meant or constituted for him?

Stites: I think it was a source of great pride and liberation in that it was something he pursued in terms of his own individuality and determination to kind of live by his own rules. But it was also source of great frustration. In *Campaign Trail*, he says that America could have been this place of fantastic possibilities and when the American public reelects Nixon, they are just kind of giving up on everything great the nation could have been. So it cuts both ways – at one level he is determined in his own behavior, in his own life, whether all that trouble makes him an outlaw, is acceptable to society to be this rugged individualist that is one of the traditional strands of the American Dream - this idea that you really can be a self-made individual and live by our own rules, exercise these extreme personal freedoms. But he looks around and says „people are giving up on this, we're betraying something that could have been something really great, this country could have been a monument to some really fantastic ideas through the pursuit of the American Dream and that hurts him emotionally and politically. He cant get away from it, even if he wants to, and I do not think he wants to.

Have you too looked at his letters, the two published collections of letter??

Maier: Yes.

Stites: Because he does talk about the American Dream book that actually became *Vegas*. There is some good stuff in those.

Maier: William McKeen called *Campaign Trail* a love story of which HST comes out broken hearted. I really like this parallel. He falls in love with what McGovern represents and when they reelect Nixon, he is brokenhearted.

Stites: I think this is a really good analysis. It's interesting too because he is one of the first people who says that „this guy, McGovern, is in with a chance“ and supposedly he is just some whacky gonzo journalist from the Rolling Stone that is not meant to be able

to play with the big boys. So he starts beating him at his own game. And part of the reason why he is attracted to McGovern is because his own association and how uncomfortable they might be with the counterculture, his is own experience in trying to run as sheriff for Pitkin County, he knows that there's this feeling he shares with other people, the need for change, and he really thinks it can happen and when it does not, he had a really good chance to, but was does this mean to all the running around on an emotional investment, and I think that might be also one of the risks of his particular style of his writing and his message because he has to be so involved and it's not just the case that he is taking a lot of drugs and pulling pranks on people...

Maier: He is keeping something like a personal journal, open to the public but a very personal journal, at least that was my impression of the *Campaign Trail* book

Stites: Yes. And it's the kind of thing you would expect him to be discussing, maybe with his editors late at night, before wiring a more traditional copy...

Maier: Sometimes he refers to the betrayal of the American Dream. What do you think, what does it mean that the American Dream has been betrayed or how does he express this in his work? That there has been something that went wrong at some point??

Stites: That's a big question. I think there might be a couple of big strands obviously, and central to it is this clichéd way, this idea of Fear and Loathing. He is both afraid and disgusted with what he sees. And one of the things, I would stress is that he likes to play with this atavistic imagery that of people being animalistic, that people are doing perverted things. But he also makes himself part of that society. If you think of the scene when he tries to check in to the Mint hotel in Vegas, he is hallucinating that he sees lizards but he is part of this kind of world, that's part of it. He goes back time and time again to Americans' fascination or desire for consumption – whether that's with cars or people gorging in themselves, consumption and a feeling of safety rather than worrying about what ideals are and that makes him angry. And the fact that he is concerned about this betrayal of the American Dream, people are not thinking about the ideology, the ideals of being a free person, achieving what you want on your own terms. They just think about having and getting and becoming the kind of caricature with a lot truth in it that so much of the world sees Americans as these fat, ugly, greedy slobs.

He gets very angry, very upset about it. And he is not really sure what to do

other than misbehave because there is not really a way to voice this otherwise. Because if you start saying this, people do not want to look at it, they'd rather just think everything is fine, the American Dream is still in place. And it almost becomes unacceptable to say, hey, like what he is trying to do. I do not think, he kind of assumes the role of a clown in certain respects, a very upset clown. 14:37

Maier: John Hellmann argues that *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* consists of two parts: In the first part is characterized by the fear and hallucinatory reality Duke and Dr. Gonzo encounter in Las Vegas. And the second, is marked by the general feeling of loathing since Duke has turned into a beast himself in order to survive in the savage environment he finds himself. Do you agree with this opinion? Why did the character somehow turn in to a beast?

Stites: I think Hellmann sees the transition when he flees Vegas the first time, when he is sitting in that bar and he points to the scene in which Duke says “Lord, take care of me otherwise you're going to have me on your hands”. And I agree with Hellmann up to that point, but one of the things he is saying, I would not say he's wrong, I just have a different take on this is...he starts on this talking about as part of this “making himself a beast”, there is an inversion of kind of a traditional religious Christian symbolism...while he's right, I think that it misses, not misses but maybe neglects something that's been brewing for long in this book in particular – and I think that Thompson as Duke plays with is that he kind of starts flirting with assuming the role of some sort of divine idiot or holy goof...I do not know if you are familiar with Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*??

Maier: Yes, I am.

Stites: This is an idea I have been playing with recently. What I would say is that there is at least some possibility that what Duke or Thompson is doing throughout is that he is making himself so ridiculous by assuming or pursuing these ideals of the American Dream in this case to such an extent that he...he is afraid, he does make an animal out of himself to kind of insulate himself from the pain but he also kind of shows people more conservative, more mainstream people how ridiculous and shallow their own behaviors are. Because in theory we'd all like to behave this way. He's the only one who's got the guts to do it. And even though he is becoming a criminal, he going into all this excess, he's somehow emerges as more genuine, as more concerned with the ideals of the country. So I think that that wrinkle needs to be taken into account a bit if you

think about what Hellmann's saying...

Maier: That sounds very interesting. I think this is a very good point.

Stites: Like I said, it is something I have been playing with recently. This idea of the divine figure in American literature; it has been suggested by other people that it's something that is overlooked. And I think it has the potential to help, possibly ease some of the difficulties, I'm sure you've found in trying to write about Thompson, because on the one hand, he does write with a lot of humor. It's dark, kind of sick and twisted, it's countercultural, anti-authoritarian in some ways. But it is not just humor without a serious point.

Maier: Yes, there is always some truth in it.

Stites: Yes and it is hard to create a category with those two things in which exist side by side. I think possibly partly because there is this tendency in contemporary society to look at humor as something that is at the base level, fundamentally trivial. It can't as easily be talking about deeper truths the way, you know, very serious hype postmodernist fiction and I think that's a mistake to make that assumption and not to recognize that assumption as made.

Maier: I think it is Hellmann who refers to Duke as a rogue figure. And this brings me back to British Literature, Shakespeare and the way he dealt with humor and criticism because even if he was making a joke, there was always something inside, like some sort of criticism. And I thought that there might be a parallel to this sort of humor.

Stites: There could be a parallel and a couple of figures come to mind, the famous fools in certain plays. But then, I wouldn't be on the top of my head, but I'd be wondering maybe some of the presentations of Falstaff as well. But also some of the later fiction that Thompson himself suggested he had certain affinities with. It's hard to tell what he read and didn't read. As far as I'm concerned, he read everything.

Maier: That's true! Well, but the description itself, what the characters are seeing there, isn't it more like an American Nightmare? At least from his point of view?

Stites: As opposed to a celebration?

Maier: No, more like a nightmare or is there any kind of hope in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*??

Stites: The scene he represents is nightmarish and part of it is the fact that he surveys a kind of stroke the ideological/political landscape of the 70s...He is pretty depressed. In terms of the actual events that go on, yes, it is nightmarish. But there is also a couple of

things that are going on - on some level Duke and Gonzo are willing to embrace a part of this nightmare and even in this authoritarian society, they can still manage to go on this massive drug binge and hang out with a bunch of district attorneys and get away with it, which is weird. It might not be comfortable, but it means that all the doors are not entirely closed. I also think that it is an extended meditation on this nightmare situation that it would not be worth saying if there was no possibility for redemption. The question is „Are Americans as a whole going to just settle for the kind of sick confidence that Duke ends on at the end of the book when he says „I felt like a monster reincarnation of Horatio Alger“ or can enough people still, perhaps collectively, see with the right kind of eyes to reorient the country onto a more proper path. There is not a lot of hope but it's a case of shouting that the end's happened when it's not entirely unavoidable, perhaps.

Maier: I agree.

Stites: And I think there is a reluctance, all the evidence piles up throughout *Vegas*, throughout *Campaign Trail* and his other works that the American Dream is dead but he keeps coming back to it. So maybe it is not.

Maier: Well, this is my research question; this is what I'm trying to figure out. But I think his tone changed radically, I mean if you read *Campaign Trail* and then the stuff he wrote in the 80s, there's a lot more disillusionment in that. But he is still coming back it all the time, so one can see that this is something that is really affecting him.

Stites: I think you're right, especially about tone change in the 80s, and his attempt to create this new Gene Skinner alter ego that was never quite as popular as Duke. Based on other people's interviews with him and some evidence in his own work that at least before Bush was reelected, he seemed to be getting reenergized and thinking „maybe, maybe this is a cycle, things are coming back again“, but you know what happened there...you know, as much as he professed to have given up on the American Dream, I don't think he ever shut the door entirely. And that caused him a lot of professional and I suspect personal pain. But he could not just write it off completely, once and for all. In his letters and other works, it's constantly, the American Dream is dead, the American Dream is dead. It's like somebody wishing an operation was over, „this has to be over now, it's gotta be over now“, but „no this is still going, I cant get rid of this pain.“

Maier: I agree with that. I mean it is so obvious, even the last things that he wrote were dealing with the same topic.

Stites: And it's one of the parallels of this trying to write about the American Dream and

even if one author, you know, I've found it myself that now everything I look at starts with „the American Dream“ comes into it...so was this such a good idea to start on this?? You know...I've limited it to two authors with my own research and he thought initially that he was going to write about all the American Dream. So beware, you might never get away from it!

Maier: Let's get back to *Fear and Loathing*. Why did he did he find the main nerve of the American Dream in Las Vegas? Was it accidentally because he went there with, because he had to do this assignment for the Sports Illustrated or did he think of it as a symbol?? Because there is always this question with Thompson if he did make a symbol on purpose or did it happen accidentally?

Stites: I don't know if he did necessarily think of it before he went, like „I'm going to Vegas because it is the main nerve.“ But I think that if he hadn't had this realization before, once he was there, supposedly working on this caption for Sports Illustrated, that he realized a lot of his concerns with what has happened to the American Dream, what had become of the American Dream, were distilled in Las Vegas, you know, this place where the normal kind of rules in certain respects are relaxed. There is something about it that he saw as a modern day kind of permutation or evolution of the earlier frontier town/settlement. The impulses that make America 'America' are present in some way but they are very unrestrained, they are not terribly structured. So when he gets there and there is, you know, excess is allowed in certain way, you can gamble a whole lot, they're really happy if you're drunk, and everyone looks like a used-car dealer from Detroit, it's a place where Americans allow some of their true motivations to show in ways that they might dress up in other respects, this other stock market, hardworking Monday til Friday in Detroit or wherever else they're from, you know, they might apply all these other ideals to what they're doing, you know, they're trying to head in society, to be respectable, provide for the family, this sort of thing. But what it comes down to it, you see, in *Vegas*, that might be part of it, or that might be the part of the story that helps to justify the fact that everybody wants to get rich real quick, they want it now. And they want the big gaudy, flashy lights and these strange shows and they want a certain type of recreation, alcoholic rather than other chemicals. And the hypocrisy that he sees is very easily visible with the right kind of analysis in a place like Las Vegas. And it is not elsewhere, so in that respect it is a setting that is really tailor-made for what he's doing.

I also wonder if it's not the case that some place like Las Vegas because it's this strange playground where people go to essentially misbehave in certain ways, makes it pretty safe to criticize the American Dream and the American society in certain respects. You know, he's not invading the homes of these used-car dealers from Detroit, you know, 'what happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas'. If you want to ignore it, you can just say that he was just some crazy drug-fueled maniac, but he is in Las Vegas, so what does that mean, don't worry about it. And that's the point, though, where the narrative does also go outside of Vegas, the journey starts in L.A. And in the end, he is in Denver, so this stuff doesn't stay in Vegas, he just dresses up in different clothes. He's fled town as a criminal and he's convinced this person at the airport that he's a Doctor of Divinity and that allows him to buy more drugs. He's dressed up as a respectable member of society.

Maier: Do you also think the desert plays an important role? Like Hellmann mentions, I don't remember exactly what he said, but Duke is always going back to the desert...back and forth, going through the desert, stopping in the desert to shoot around...

Stites: In my own work, I talk a little bit about that. And I think this is where, you know, how conscious it is, I'm not sure, but he is emphasizing it in some way, even though it's not on a coastal margin, Las Vegas remains one of these settlements that is on a social margin. And for an outlaw, somebody who is really embraced some twisted illusions of the ideals of the American individualism that he needs that space to go and recharge his batteries. And it also suggests the fact that maybe that what was Las Vegas is built on isn't all that substantial anyway, it's built on some sort of moral desert or ideological desert perhaps. And one of the things it's possible to think about might be this idea that he, there's a real strong contrast between him running through the desert, he is shooting around, he's speaking half-jokingly directly to some God, and he contrasts this with his home in Woody Creek which is so much of a different kind of American wilderness, it's fertile, it's home, it's safe (it could be with all the explosives and other things lying around), but he needs those spaces, for both his fictional alter egos and perhaps also for him.

Maier: I agree. Especially the difference between Woody Creek and the other places because Woody Creek is always the safe haven where he is always going back to.

Stites: Yes. And in a certain way, you don't get the impression that desert might be a bit more peaceful, you don't .

Maier: Yes, like it is getting too much for him and so he gets out and goes to the desert.

Stites: Yes, you know, like all the other lizards, he goes and bathes in the sun for a while. Like that meeting with the strange cop, you know, ultimately though he can't survive in the desert.

Maier: Do you think that Raoul Duke is some sort of self-caricature of the real HST, like an exaggerated version??

Stites: I think that's in certain ways what he has become. I think there is a lot of truth in Thompson's own claims that when he first created this character, it was kind of a safety mechanism. He could write about things that he and other people had done without people getting into legal trouble, especially in *Campaign Trail*, when he does not want to talk about famous journalists doing some of the things he attributes them to Duke.

As time goes on, he started accepting these speaking engagements – I'm sure you know that he was very upset about the character of Uncle Duke in *Doonesbury*, I think that at that point, Duke starts to take over as a kind of exaggerated version of Thompson's own life, especially as he feels forced to behave more and more like Duke when he is in public. Some of the interviews where he says „I'm never sure which one people want me to be, Hunter Thompson or Raoul Duke, usually it's Duke”, and there's a bit of sour grapes to that, you know, he created this very successful image, public image of himself, and then he didn't like it.

Maier: Yes, he became as prisoner of his own persona.

Stites: Yeah. It was almost as if he had become a caricature of a caricature. Their relationship got very blurred. And he recognizes this going on to an extent with others, for example, when he talks about Jean Claude Killy, when he looked around, other famous celebrities.

Maier: But do you think that the persona Dr. Hunter S. Thompson in *Campaign Trail* is closer to the real HST or it just another kind of character?

Stites: I suspect that he's probably a bit closer to the real HST than maybe Duke was. And just the fact that he was drawing that kind of distinction, you know, when he has been so famous as Duke, he became this real national celebrity, he's Duke. Again though, just because of how he writes, I don't know if we could say that they're one and the same person. Perhaps more autobiographical, but not without embellishments and alterations to suit his purposes.

Maier: Do you think he was aware of all these effects that creating these personas had, the myths he created? Did he do it on purpose; was he aware of what effect his personas had??

Stites: In terms of taking over his own life?

Maier: Yes, or more write from the position of Duke, what are the effects? There is always this mythical air about Duke that made him so interesting because you never know what was real, what fact, what was fiction?

Stites: Yes, I think to an extent yes. The fiction writer in Thompson picked up on that. And partly, it was a very utilitarian thing for him to do, but he saw the power that figures like this could have. And one of these letters wrote in the 70s, he talks about this composite creature, Duke, that he had created and says “if you talk about the American Dream, you can come up with this character to dissect its meaning, and that's very useful and if you do it like Fitzgerald did, where you come up with the character and then you get to the scene. But if you do it the other way around like I am, then things get really difficult.”

So he was aware of the power in terms of his writing and the message. I think he was also aware that this could become a usable public faces for him. I don't necessarily think that he saw in it quite the success and power to take over his own life and then get difficult for him to work on a story in a way than it did in a way when he set out. I don't think as creating his own jailer if you want to look at it that way, when he created Duke. This was a liberating character injecting to his writing. So maybe he was shortsighted in certain respects.

Maier: Well, come to the Nixon character because that's very interesting...What did Nixon represent for Thompson? I think it was he was kind of his muse??

Stites: Yes, and lots of people have talked about this. And just partly the way he is writing, he is the great villain of Thompson's work and he is the character that he can locate everything that is sick and wrong with America in this character, this figure of Nixon that he creates. I would say with good reason, I don't have any great admiration with Nixon, I'm not sure of how many of Thompson's fans do. But I don't think that this was necessarily entirely unconscious. He knew what he was doing. He didn't just pick Nixon randomly, he did see him symptomatic of a much larger sickness and rather than just kind of producing some sort of general screed attacking the American

population in general, in Nixon he finds this demonic, dark, counter to the strangely heroic, but at least idealistic figure of Duke or Dr. Thompson that you can say „Look, you gotta stop this guy.“ There's a certain amount of, even if he does not want to admit it, respect for Nixon. I think you see it in the obituary he wrote when Nixon died and that's just a horrible attack on that man as funny as it is. But at the same time you can see that this was somebody it somebody it was worth fighting with. And then he lacks that for quite a long while.

Maier: Yes, because after Nixon he did not have this counterpart...

Stites: He never had an adversary.

Maier: In your work, you call Thompson a „living embodiment of the American Dream“. Why so?

Stites: If you think of some of the strands I try to identify as very central to the ongoing permutations of the America Dream, things like individualism, like to take one of them, his determination to make himself in his own image of what a man, an American man, should be. But supposedly that have always been central to impossibility and meaning of both the American nation and the American Dream. - He did that very successfully. Perhaps he became a victim of it in the end but for all he might have been an outlaw journalist, technically criminal in the eyes of the law, he really did live according to his own code, the ideology from American Westerns, he played by his own rules, he believed in personal liberty, at the expense of sometimes being safe within the law. And while he may have been hard to be friends with, he also saw other people as having the potential to pursue the same kind of freedoms he did if they would just have the courage to do so. And he was basically entirely self-made, some of this self-making was fictional and some of it wasn't. And as part of this project, he was very deeply concerned with what it meant to be living in America like he did.

Maier: Some people think that HST was just a left wing radical who wrote drug infused nonsense, others call him an idealist who followed certain notions of what he himself considered right or wrong which I think are somehow kind of similar to the ones of the Founding Fathers, like McKeen called him a 'traditional' person in the sense of adhering to the traditional, most basic American ideals...Do you agree with that he, even though he seemed to be so crazy and an outlaw and having troubles with the law all the time, that he was very traditional in his ideals?

Stites: In terms of some of those more radical founding ideals, definitely. And I think that that was part of what caused him so much upset, and he was kind of looking around saying „really I’m a very traditional orthodox American in certain ways, there should be more people like me, but there aren’t.“ And did he make comments that for good or for ill, for all the problems he saw with the United States, it was probably the only place in the world where he could live the way he did and pursue the kind of ideology that he did because of the roots the American nation, the American dream had in some very revolutionary, radical thought of the time.

I think one of the things HST maybe have been more keenly aware of than most people growing up in the US now, you certainly come across that in the history lessons, the extent to which it was a new kind of democratic experiment that took place in the late 1700s when the nation was formed, but there plenty of people even within what became the US itself that were looking at people like Washington, Jefferson, the Founding Fathers, that these people were dangerous nutcases...you can’t behave that way, law and order will break down. And it might not have worked perfectly but it worked in some way. I don’t know that Thompson would have said „Oh I’m more like Jefferson or Washington“ but I think he had a more finely developed sense of the risks and that you need just to walk kind of that the margin of what is acceptable in terms of established tradition and authority that was necessary to this American experiment in some ways. That's a lot of words to put into his mouth, but that's my interpretation.

Maier: Yes, I think I would agree on this. And it brings me right to the next question: What makes HST so particular in the chorus of social and political critics in the US??

Stites: So particular?

Maier: Yes, because you cannot compare him to any other critics as he has his own voice.

Stites: Yes, and part of that is formal. Just the fact that he had gone kind of one step further than New Journalists like Tom Wolfe by injecting himself into the story. He was bringing fictional elements into his Gonzo Journalism if you want to call it that. It's a combination of this and what is actually a very strong intellect, which means that he could not really speak with a voice that could be duplicated;

Given that, for all his association with the counterculture, he never really stayed really firmly aligned with one group. He saw things were much simpler than perhaps his readymade what initially people believed of what is right or wrong and who's got this,

you can just call it the American Dream, you can call it the American values, something is right or wrong and that determines his behavior in a very threatening way to more mainstream society, but in a way that you've seen it identifying him correctly as, for all it's off the wall, oddball qualities, is somehow descended from the Founding ideals or some of the founding ideals of this nation. It's simple to answer that question: He is unique because he is so American and really believes strange individuality for everybody, promise that the American Dream seems to hold out without answering how that can work for an entire society made up by individuals.

Maier: Even though he criticized basically everything, you always get a feeling that he is a patriot.

Stites: It definitely piles up with that, you know, draping himself with American flags on covers on books. I don't know if you've read about Ralph Steadman's account of becoming an American citizen in the mid/late Seventies and he told Hunter this and he thought Hunter would be pleased but apparently Hunter got upset and said „No you can't do that“, like not really the response you would expect and it wasn't was Steadman expected either, you know this, „no you cant be American, you're too English“

Maier: To sum it up, do you think that HST's American Dream is something that is/was dying or was even dead at his time and do you think that there was still some hope left in HST??

Stites: My view of this has changed over time. When I first started, I thought he was kind of the great announcer of the final days of the American Dream. I think he saw it in many cases as in pretty terminal state, the doctors might be thinking, maybe we should just unplug the life support system, but I think ultimately he, as much as it would have been easier, less painful for him to entirely do so, he never gave up hope on it. That's part of the source where I locate a good deal of his anger and his loathing in particular. There's still some possibility here, I know because I'm pursuing these facets of this dream myself and if I could just shout loud enough, get enough people to pay attention, maybe some sort of recovery is possible.

I think this issue is more complicated by his suicide. Obviously, he wasn't...or maybe you need to be careful to interpret his suicide as too much of a literary or a public event, although given his plans for his memorial service it certainly became that; but some of the stuff, Brinkley talks about this, he kept using this old mountain frame of

a child getting old, for him at least, the possibilities have started to disappear and maybe he did finally give up hope. In terms of his writing, I don't think that for all the announcements of the final death and decline of the American Dream that there's no possibility for rejuvenation. It might not be a comfortable rejuvenation and the question remains as how to make it as worthwhile as possible if it can be done. And it is pretty desperate. It's a feeling of crisis that the American Dream is in permanent crisis. But he could never quite give up on it.

Maier: I think in his writing at least, if you look at it closely, there's always this hope, if you look for it, you can find it. And there is this book by Andrew Delbanco about the American Dream...

Stites: Yes, *A Meditation on Hope*...

Maier: Yes exactly. So I'm thinking about connecting this to Thompson, you know that in the end, in his writing, there was always some little tiny piece of hope left...that is also the main theme of the American Dream...

Stites: I can not remember but I'm pretty sure it is in the Delbanco book where at one point he talk about, alongside with the hope that goes with the American Dream, is this suspicion that all the kind of and pursuing material goods and success really amount to little more than, I'm paraphrasing here, „fidgeting while we wait for death“...If it's not Delbanco, it is Jim Cullen. But I think that idea it pretty central, something you can put your finger on. For all the fantastic promises of the American Dream, That there is a much darker side to it, if you want to call it an American nightmare, or just the simple possibility that we need tell ourselves theses stories as we basically just follow the process to hurdle towards our graves and demise. And I think Thompson recognizes this at some level. The question is, do you orient yourself to the actual getting and achieving or is there is a more valuable process of personal or societal analysis that can go on here? And in his dark humorous way, HST engaged in a series of criticisms that were meant to add something to this societal discourse.

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Abstract

Der Amerikanische Traum ist in Hunter S. Thompsons Texten ein ständig wiederkehrendes Motiv. Auf der Suche nach dem Traum, war es dem Gonzo-Journalisten nicht genug, die Lage der amerikanischen Nation gegen Ende der 60er Jahre bloß zu schildern, sondern sie zu erleben, um dann keine objektive Wahrheit, sondern seine subjektive Sicht der Dinge niederzuschreiben. Seine Beschreibungen der amerikanischen Nation und deren Traum in seinen Werken *Angst und Schrecken in Las Vegas* und *Angst und Schrecken: Im Wahlkampf '72* sind kaum positiv. Im Gegenteil. Er verweist sogar auf den Tod des Amerikanischen Traumes und den Verfall Amerikas.

Der Traum erscheint ihm in vielerlei Gestalt: in Symbolen, wie zum Beispiel der von Geld und Einfluss regierten Stadt Las Vegas, die Thompsons Alter Ego Raoul Duke als Nervenzentrum des Traums identifiziert; Seine Protagonisten durchleuchten die traditionellen Werte der Gesellschaft und müssen feststellen, dass sie sich bei näherem Betrachten als Heuchelei erweisen - als Mythos, wie eben der Amerikanische Traum selbst.

Der Reporter, der auf Grund seines einzigartigen Schreibstils oft als Stiefkind der New Journalists oder gesetzloser Journalist (Outlaw Journalist) bezeichnet wurde, wird von der Angst - der Angst vor dem Untergang alles Guten für das Amerika seiner Meinung nach einmal eingetreten ist - übermannt. In seinen von Halluzinogenen eingefärbten Charakterisierungen entlarvt er die Gesellschaft als korrupt, oberflächlich und gierig. Versteckt hinter dem nationalen Moralkodex und unter dem Vorwand den Amerikanischen Traum zu suchen, erlauben seine Mitmenschen sich dem Journalisten der Freiheit zu berauben, und somit seinen persönlichen Traum zu zerstören. Jedoch nimmt Thompson nicht die Rolle des Moralapostels ein, sondern beweist immer wieder seine Mitschuld an den erschreckenden Zuständen im Amerika der frühen 70er

Jahre. Angesichts dessen erfassen den Reporter Angst und Schrecken, die ihn dazu bringen seinen Mitmenschen Streiche zu spielen, Lügen aufzutischen und der Realität mit einer Prise schwarzen Humors ins Auge zu sehen. Aus Frustration mit der Situation verwandelt er den Präsidenten, Polizisten, Politiker und sogar seine Kollegen im Journalismus in Raubtiere, die nach seinem Blut lechzen. Thompson scheint der Einzige zu sein, der sich über den Untergang des einst großen nationalen Mythos Gedanken macht. Mit Hilfe von in den Text eingefügten Interviewtranskripten, Autor- und Herausgebernotizen, Ausschnitten aus Zeitungsartikeln und Zitaten belegte der Journalist seine Theorien über den Verfall der Nation. Am Ende - nach der Wiederwahl Richard Nixons, der für Thompson all das, was in Amerika falsch lief, verkörperte - schien sich Thompson geschlagen zu geben.

Die Kernidee des Amerikanischen Traums ist die Hoffnung – Hoffnung auf Veränderung, auf einen neuen Anfang. Auch in Thompsons Texten hat man nie das Gefühl, dass er den wichtigsten Mythos der amerikanischen Nation komplett verwirft. Immerhin hat dieser Mythos schon Jahrhunderte lang Menschen aus verschiedensten Ländern verbunden und motiviert, Amerika zu dem Land zu erbauen, das Thompson so schätzte.