Gonzo by Design: Aesthetics Under the Influence of Hunter S. Thompson

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream was first published in *Rolling Stone* magazine, spread across two issues, in November 1971. Written by Hunter S. Thompson but originally printed under the name of his alter-ego, Raoul Duke – a self-caricature who serves as the main protagonist – the story was accompanied by a series of (now highly recognisable and distinctive) illustrations by Ralph Steadman. Along with the 1966 book *Hell's Angels* and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* (which was published in *Rolling Stone* throughout 1972 as a string of dispatches from the presidential campaign trail, illustrated again by Steadman, before being collated as a book in 1973), *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is one of three contemporary classics of American literature written by Thompson between 1965 and 1975. This intense decade of writing, which produced numerous other magazine and newspaper articles as well as a significant archive of personal correspondence[1], is widely regarded as the high point of Thompson's literary career. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was published in book form in 1972, along with a selection of Steadman drawings and cover art, securing Thompson's reputation as a significant writer – a self-proclaimed 'gonzo' journalist (Thompson 1979: 114) – and earning him a place in the canon of Western literature.

Although historically and culturally affiliated with the New Journalism of Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer and others (see Wolfe 1973; Weber 1974; and Weingarten 2005), Thompson stands apart as a founder and practitioner of gonzo journalism – a style of writing characterized by the author's 'rigorously first person' (Cowan 2009: 78) involvement within the story. As James Caron points out, the essence of Wolfe's New Journalism is that reporting can have an aesthetic dimension traditionally associated with fiction writing (1985: 2). Thompson pushes Wolfe's notion of the 'downstage voice' beyond non-participatory on-the-scene observation into direct involvement with the action; the reporter becomes a character within the story, often as a loose cannon or subversive influence. Gonzo journalism and the underlying concept of gonzo as an aesthetic (or world view) charged with libertarian, free-thinking values have subsequently become 'part of our modern lexicon' (Hoover 2009: 326). As such, the OED defines gonzo as 'a type of committed, subjective journalism characterized by factual distortion and exaggerated rhetorical style' (with the earliest citation relating to Thompson) and, more generally, as a term applicable to anything 'bizarre', 'crazy' or 'far-fetched'. Elsewhere, the Merriam-Webster online dictionary suggests gonzo journalism is 'idiosyncratically subjective but engagé', and that the term gonzo can apply to anything 'bizarre' or 'freewheeling [...] unconventional especially to the point of outrageousness', offering the suggestion of a gonzo comedian as an example[2].

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[1] Douglas Brinkley, historian and literary executor of Thompson's estate, estimates that the author composed approximately 20,000 letters over his lifetime, starting from the age of ten; 'always making carbon copies' (Brinkley in Thompson 1997: xxi-xxii). A fraction of these have been published in two collected volumes, covering the periods 1955-1967 and 1968-1976 respectively (see Thompson 1997 and 2000), with a third covering 1977-2005 slated for publication in 2010.

[2] There is an overlap here between Thompson, as a satirist who refers to himself as an 'outlaw' journalist, and the comedian Bill Hicks. Both shared similar political sensibilities, excessive lifestyles and provocative personas as public

This paper will explore gonzo's literary and artistic precedents; the importance of collaboration and the extent to which gonzo could, or should, be considered an auteur style; and gonzo's immense cultural impact since the early 1970s, which has found expression within areas as diverse as scientific scepticism (Richardson and Richardson 2004), marketing models (Locke 1998 and 2001), pornography (Dines 2006) and, somewhat incongruously, Judaism (Goldstein 2006). The conclusion considers whether there is such a thing as being gonzo by design and, if so, asks whether it adheres to a coherent set of aesthetic principles. In this context, what constitutes gonzo style is being considered in relation to the broad definition of aesthetics, offered by Michael Kelly, as a field of 'critical reflection on art, culture and nature' (2003: x). Similarly, the notion of design being used here relates to issues of creative effect and stylisation, rather than the more concrete concept of problem solving through the manufacture of tangible objects. Nevertheless, gonzo raises interesting issues as a mode of communication associated with a distinctive visual and verbal style that is often intended (or designed) to have a seditious impact. The relationship between word and image is important because it invites questions about how gonzo is best defined, given the complexity of visual-verbal interactions, while highlighting the importance of Steadman's illustrations to the popular appeal of Thompson's work.

Steadman collaborated with Thompson on various projects and exploits for over thirty years (prior to his friend's death in 2005), providing gonzo artwork and illustrations that drew inspiration from, and in turn helped to inspire, Thompson and his writing. Their relationship had a strong symbiotic element from the start, when Steadman played an instrumental role in the seminal gonzo work 'The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved' (1970). He and Thompson were brought together as artist and writer, having never previously met, in order to produce a commissioned article on the Kentucky Derby, which they subsequently attended as a fledgling creative partnership. Steadman featured heavily in the story, by name, thereby influencing its outcome as well as capturing the experience in his artwork. The personal involvement of both men, who became the drunken epitome of the decadence they sought to expose in others, was so integral to the piece that the by-line under which it was originally published in *Scanlan's Monthly* read: 'Written under duress by Hunter S. Thompson' and 'Sketched with eyebrow pencil and lipstick by Ralph Steadman'[3] (Thompson 1970: 1-2). Thompson initially distanced himself from the writing, calling it 'useless, except for the flashes of style and tone it captures' (Thompson 2000: 309), while offering praise for Steadman's drawings as 'absolutely first class' (306). But following publication the article received a wave of critical acclaim hailing it as a 'great breakthrough in journalism' (Torrey and Simonson 2008: 21) and Thompson embraced this good fortune along with the accolade of being 'pure Gonzo' – a term of apocryphal origin intended to capture the 'off the wall' spirit of the article (47). However,

performers. Hicks was part of a group known as the Outlaw Comics (True 2002) and his unconventional, highly personal and often outrageous style would fit the definition of a gonzo comedian; so too would the work of Lenny Bruce.

[3] The use of make-up is a true story. As Steadman recalls in *Between the Eyes* (1984): 'I had left my inks and colours in the taxi and was therefore, as far as an artist is concerned anyway, naked. Miraculously, Natalie [a rep from Revlon and wife of the editor Donald Goddard] had dozens of samples of Revlon lipstick and make-up preparations which solved the problem in one stroke. They were the ultimate in assimilated flesh colour.' (63)

despite Steadman's role in this creative process – referring to the Kentucky Derby illustrations as 'the birth of Gonzo art' (Steadman 2006: 9) – it is often taken to be primarily a literary form, privileging Thompson's writing as the main focal point.

The fact that Steadman's input tends to be overlooked is curious, given that Thompson analyzed the gonzo concept and regarded it as a visually orientated style from early on. In the unpublished jacket copy for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, Thompson explains that the ideal of gonzo reporting would be to buy a fat notebook, write up the experience of an event and send the notebook for publication without editing (1979: 114). He goes on:

> That way, I felt, the eye & mind of the journalist would be functioning as a camera. The writing would be selective & necessarily interpretive – but once the image was written, the words would be final; in the same way that a Cartier-Bresson photograph is always (he says) a full frame negative. No alterations in the darkroom, no cutting or cropping, no spotting... no editing.' (114)

Such a statement not only implies the immediacy that Thompson sought (and frequently seems to achieve) within his writing, but also the close relationship between writing and the production of images that he self-consciously perceives. In his analogy, the author's goal was no less than an attempt to operate like a camera, exposing and recording a personalized view of the world in the form of a written image, and then to see it reproduced (in print) unexpurgated. Aside from the idealism running through this description, there is a strong indication of the value Thompson placed upon *seeing* a given event and conveying the experience and emotion faithfully but expressionistically. In the same descriptive passage, Thompson seems to acknowledge the impossibility of 'true' gonzo reporting, referring to *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* as a 'failed experiment' (117) whilst admitting the closest analogy to the ideal would probably be 'a film director/producer who writes his own scripts, does his own camera work and somehow manages to film himself in action, as the protagonist or at least a main character' (115). Michael Moore and other potential gonzo filmmakers aside, Steadman's sketches – especially those made as a direct participant – arguably come closest to the immediacy of vision Thompson aspired to.

In relation to the visual aspects of Thompson's prose, a penchant for consuming alcohol and psychotropic drugs is reflected in the hallucinatory qualities of his writing. Duke, the lead character in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (through whose eyes the story is reported), is almost constantly under the influence of at least one mind-bending drug; a notion vividly exploited in Terry Gilliam's 1998 film adaptation and the accompanying poster design of Duke's head, distorted and twisted in keeping with the reality he is experiencing. The fantasy elements Thompson/Duke subsequently describe drift into the absurd but remain tied to reality through a deft mixture of high and low cultural references, ranging from shaking an imaginary fist in defiance at 'Efram Zimbalist, Jr., swooping down on me in his FBI/Screaming Eagle helicopter' (1972: 85), to stating: 'I felt like Othello [...] I'd only been in town a few hours, and we'd already laid the groundwork for a classic tragedy' (122). Thompson's literary heritage is complex. Within the American tradition, he has been compared to F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway and H.L. Mencken, amongst others, for his ability to write with a combination of (sometimes)

elegant prose, lamenting the failing idealism of America; an overtly direct and masculine voice; and a gift for humour and excoriating satirical observations (see Brinkley in Thompson 2000: xvii; and Sickels 2000). Wolfe even compares Thompson's life and work to Walt Whitman's 'barbaric yawp' – an inspirational cosmic utterance – before nominating him as 'the [twentieth] century's greatest comic writer in the English language', following in the nineteenth century footsteps of Mark Twain (Wolfe 2005). As Caron argues, gonzo is part of the American tall tale tradition, full of what Twain termed 'snapper' moments where the absurdity of the story reveals itself as fantastical (1985: 8). Exaggeration for effect, often embracing the surreal, is therefore a central characteristic of the gonzo style.

In *Between the Eyes* (1984), Steadman discusses key influences upon his artistic development, noting that '(t)he real stimulus [...] was discovering George Grosz and John Heartfield, and *The Age of Gold* [*L'âge d'or* (1930)] by Luis Buñuel' (13). One can see aspects of Grosz and Heartfield in Steadman's use of line and collage as well as in the content of his satirical images. Buñuel's ability to construct an alternate reality that is absurd and surreal, but yet still touches upon enough recognisable imagery and implied meaning to cause uproar, dovetails with the gonzo attitude. Steadman also references Dadaism and Marcel Duchamp (13-14), and his artwork incorporates aspects of Max Ernst, William Hogarth and Francisco de Goya, to name just a few, while playfully drawing upon art historical references to scathing effect – consider his caricature of Richard Nixon, incongruously replete with halo and saintly robes, moving through a holy looking cloister akin to those painted by Fra Angelico (Thompson 2005: 412). There is also a strong similarity to the darker imaginings of J.J. Grandville (the pseudonym of Jean Ignace Isidore Gerard), whose illustrations of animals 'being used *en masse* to "people" situations' present a 'prophetic dream' (Berger 1980: 19) whose nightmarish qualities are realised in Thompson's vision of Las Vegas, where a female check-in clerk transmogrifies into a Moray eel and a bar room full of punters morphs into a lizard lounge colonized by blood sucking reptiles; the latter taken by Steadman as the inspiration for one of his pictures (Thompson 1972: 23-24, 30-31)

Steadman's artwork permeates Thompson's writing, providing distinctive cover art for magazines and books and making his articles and publications stand out and draw attention. These images complement the extrovert qualities of Thompson's prose, which in turn delivers upon the twisted beauty implicit within (and promised by) Steadman's illustrations. Because they are frequently seen before the text is read, such as on a book cover, Steadman's artwork almost provides a brand identity for gonzo – communicated through visual design – which also includes his distinctive handwritten text, full of ink splashes and bold gestures. This is not to detract from Thompson's quality as a writer. Indeed, both Thompson and Steadman were already establishing themselves independently as an author and an artist prior to collaborating on the Kentucky Derby piece. Nevertheless, it was the collaborative aspect to gonzo that helped set it apart. Reflecting on this word and image relationship, formulated whilst producing the Derby article for *Scanlan's*, Steadman states:

> I think what he [Thompson] saw in this, our connection, was somebody that somehow
> saw the thing in pictures as he saw it in words, and that seemed to me to be part of the

> whole chemistry of it. Our chemistry, there, made gonzo possible... (Gibney 2008: 41 mins)

The visual-verbal aspects of gonzo are therefore closely interrelated, with the text feeding off of the images and vice versa. As W.J.T. Mitchell frequently points out, notably in *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (1994), the symbiotic relationship between word and image is unavoidable and often problematic; it is best understood as an unstable dialectical trope, rather than a fixed opposition of binary forms (83). In other words, text has a visual component that is both literal and figurative (we literally see words on the page, and they always retain the ability to suggest a visual concept) whilst images consistently require or invite language to enter 'the visual field' in order to open up a discourse – when we read, the 'potential for the shift "from word to image" is always there' and a 'similar potential [to evoke language] resides in visual images' (Mitchell 1996: 47). In the case of Steadman and Thompson, we might apply Mitchell's use of the term 'imagetext' to indicate a situation where word and image appear to supplement or augment one another effectively; as opposed to 'image/text' (with a separating slash) where word and image are dissonant (1994: 89, ft 9). Expanding upon this idea, we might even relate the supplementary quality Mitchell discusses to Jacques Derrida's 'supplement', which identifies an element that both adds to and completes an already whole concept (1972: 260). From a theoretical point of view, this is in keeping with the symbiotic qualities that define word and image relationships in general, and it captures the closely shared creative vision of Steadman and Thompson in particular. Steadman's illustrations do not just accompany Thompson's writing; they help to define the gonzo style:

> There was a bigger reason why you asked me to illustrate that book [*Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*]: no one would have noticed it if it had not been for my illustrations [...] They are icons. They are some of the most well known images, certainly in twentieth century American art if not in world art. They are the icons that everybody recognises. (Steadman in Ewing 2003: 21 mins)

Thompson and Steadman are individual auteurs whose collaboration formed a style of communication neither could have entirely created alone. As such, gonzo is an auteur style associated with two people, Thompson for the words and Steadman for the pictures, but where the combined efforts are greater than the sum of their parts. To publish *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* without the illustrations, for example, would be to reproduce an incomplete version of a contemporary classic. They each have distinct qualities within their recognised medium which cannot be copied by a third party without becoming derivative, but this does not stop people trying. Thompson has allegedly 'inspired more bad journalism than perhaps any other American writer' (Torrey and Simonson 2008: 199) and his phrase 'fear and loathing' is so ubiquitous that seldom a week goes by without it being co-opted or reworked for the title or subtitle of a newly published article, with subjects ranging (as they did in Thompson's own work) from politics and sport through culture and travel – and almost any other area of journalistic activity imaginable.

The penetration of gonzo into mainstream culture is a phenomenon in itself. Since the early 1970s it is has found expression in areas as diverse as scientific scepticism (Richardson and

Richardson 2004); marketing models (Locke 1998 and 2001); religion (Goldstein 2006); pornography (Dines 2006); and, according to John Ingledew (2005), in the photographic work of Wolfgang Tillmans – whom Ingledew terms a gonzo photographer, 'recording what he sees in an uninterrupted stream of unedited photographs' (142) – and the work of Terry Richardson, who is argued to have 'brought gonzo snapshot photography to high fashion' (142). What is remarkable about these associations, which are by no means the only examples of gonzo's reach and influence, is that in each of these areas Thompson has been directly acknowledged as an inspirational figure; in many cases, gonzo is incorporated into the title of a given work. Rabbi Niles Elliot Goldstein embraces Thompson's pro-active and 'intensely personal' ethos in *Gonzo Judaism: A Bold Path for Renewing an Ancient Faith* (2006: ix); in *Gonzo Marketing: Winning Through Worst Practices* (2001), Christopher Locke overlooks Thompson's deeper political and social sentiments to latch onto the notion that 'gonzo is about being engaged', stating that to reject distance, impartiality and objectivity is to care about outcomes in a consumer orientated marketplace (10); while in *Gonzo Science: Anomalies, Heresies and Conspiracies* (2004), Jim and Allen Richardson argue that science (failing to uphold its own methodological paradigms) can be non-objective, a quality they liken to gonzo journalism, before then employing elements of Thompson's 'guerilla style [...] raids on objectivity' (9) to challenge shortcomings in particular scientific theories and re-evaluate overlooked, but potentially valid, alternatives.

The oddity of these references is that gonzo's popularity, broadly speaking, is based around Thompson's extrovert public persona as drug-addled icon of the sixties counterculture, whereby he is perceived as a living, breathing version of the Duke caricature – an image crystallized in the popular mind by Steadman's illustrations. This is far removed from the complex and ideologically engaged satire that defines the gonzo style, taking instead just one part of the gonzo image as a metonym for the whole. In fact it seems unusual that even this aspect of gonzo would generate such a breadth of appeal – given that the Duke character is associated with drug taking and other illegal or anti-social activities – but part of the reductive process reformulates Duke/Thompson as a hipster, in the sense defined by Norman Mailer in his infamous 1957 essay 'The White Negro'. The hipster only 'exists in the present' (1968: 271); he acknowledges death and embraces romanticism and existentialism as a strategy for resisting Cold War oppression. Most importantly, the Duke persona tallies neatly with Mailer's combative figure of 'a frontiersman in the Wild West of American life'– as opposed to the squares, 'trapped in the totalitarian tissues of American society' (272).

However, as Thomas Frank argues in *The Conquest of Cool: Business culture, counterculture, and the rise of hip consumerism* (1997), Mailer's proposal of hip as 'some kind of fundamental adversary to a joyless, conformist capitalism' (17) constitutes 'one of the great public myths of our times' (12). Frank picks apart the 'titanic symbolic clash of hip and square', focusing on the counterculture as an 'enduring commercial myth' rather than a historical phenomenon (32), pointing out that in the sixties hip was not so much an alternative to the mainstream as the mainstream itself. Hip was born of the baby boomer generation and fifties consumerism and soon after became 'central to the way American capitalism understood itself and explained itself to the public' (26). Although not part of Frank's analysis, Thompson/Duke's outlaw persona

helped establish and define the concept of gonzo within popular culture because it was recognised, and has been configured (regardless of authorial intentions), as a shorthand reference to hipster identity.

To be clear, Thompson's own conception of the counterculture was complex and knowing, sharing with Warren Hinckle the awareness that despite all the rhetoric about alienation from a society based on corporate greed many inhabitants of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district (the central hub of the countercultural movement) were 'frantic consumers' who were highly 'brand name conscious' (Howard 1991: 226). Thompson referred to *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* only half sarcastically as 'a vile epitaph for the drug culture of the sixties' (1979: 118). And yet, despite exposing sixties mythology in way 'calculated to throw [himself...] to the wolves of his own subculture' (Woods 1972: 18), Thompson survived and was even embraced as 'a voice for their generation' (Sickels 2000: 70). Through this simplified association with Thompson as a countercultural icon, the problems surrounding Duke as a drug-addled lunatic are effectively minimized because he is seen merely as a hipster fighting the good fight. Duke is neutralized, and becomes a playful reference, because he is interpreted as a caricature of a familiar countercultural type, rather than understood as a vehicle for Thompson's overt criticism of American society and the death of the American dream. Gonzo, as a sort of epithet, can therefore be adopted by areas as diverse as Judaism and science, marketing models and photography without really referring in any meaningful way to the more profound aspects of Thompson and Steadman's work. To incorporate gonzo into the title of a book on these subjects, or to affiliate the name in some other way, is primarily about introducing an element of 'cool' (which is a more contemporary synonym for hip) by association.

However, this is not to devalue gonzo or to suggest that Thompson and Steadman can be configured as 'sell outs', but to argue that one particular strand of gonzo, based around the Duke caricature, has emerged as the mainstream reference point for a far more complex series of artistic and cultural endeavours. In many ways, the popular appeal of gonzo style is based on a false perception of Steadman and Thompson's work but there are those who directly or indirectly embrace the gonzo aesthetic of first person involvement in an ideologically engaged satire. The documentary filmmakers Michael Moore, Morgan Spurlock and Nick Broomfield, to suggest three possible names, arguably come closest to a contemporary version of gonzo reporting, touching upon the visually orientated ideal Thompson himself defined. In each case, they do not attempt to emulate the gonzo style of Thompson and Steadman – instead developing their own sense of authorship and identity – but they do embrace the aesthetic principles of gonzo as a pro-active and personally invested mode of communication. It is not really possible for a work to be gonzo by design if the motivation is to recreate Thompson and Steadman's style, especially because the gonzo ethos is to be 'of the moment' rather than working retrospectively or with hindsight. However, it is possible to tap into the spirit of gonzo – perhaps taking inspiration, rather than presentation, from Thompson and Steadman – by fully appreciating its depth of purpose and the morality at the heart of any true satire. Making a self-conscious reference to the gonzo logo – a double-thumbed fist holding a peyote button, designed in the late

sixties – Thompson acknowledges the 'deadly serious underbelly of Gonzo' that so many people fail to appreciate: 'the fist inside the glove' (Thompson 2009: 383).

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