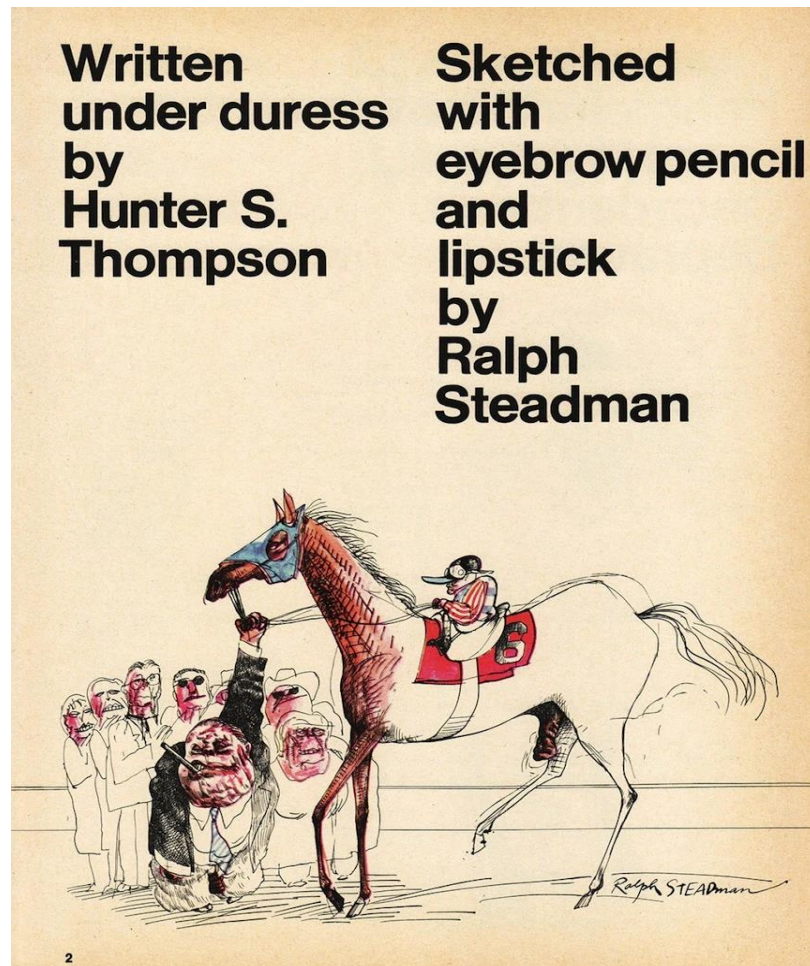


The Idiosyncratic Perspective of Gonzo Journalism:  
Thompson's "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved"



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## Introduction

Well away into the sports article “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” (1970, hereafter “The Kentucky Derby”) narrator and writer Hunter S. Thompson shares the Kentucky Derby race results in no more than three lines. He brings the relevant sports news as follows: “Holy Land, Ralph’s choice, stumbled and lost his jockey in the final turn. Mine, Silent Screen, had the lead coming into the stretch, but faded tot fifth at the finish. The winner was a 16-1 shot named Dust Commander” (22). It is not hard to imagine that the general equine sports enthusiast would like to read some more detail about the race and its course. Yet, this appears hardly an oversight from Thompson taken the overall context of the piece. Thompson appears deliberately to have put the race results in the middle of the article with little elaboration. Assuming this was Thompson’s intention, from the point of view of literary discourse, then it would be a reasonable question to ask why. The formal and thematic nature of Thompson’s famous article will be the object of analysis in this thesis. It will show that Thompson’s idiosyncratic perspective of the Kentucky Debry, as well as his confrontational style, foreground his socio-cultural and political critique of, not only, the Kentucky Derby itself but also the American south, as a cultural region, and some aspects of American culture as a whole. The analysis of the style and structure of Thompson’s text will define the key stylistic features of his Gonzo style, explain how they work and what effect they have on the representation of the text’s content and potentially on the reader.

Thompson’s way of reporting sports news is quite unconventional to sports journalism standards of the time (Winston 156). The narrator addresses his

readership directly and in the first person. There is talk about and analysis of the people working for and at the Kentucky Derby, and those visiting the event.

Thompson mentions the Louisville locals and details their peculiarities. For instance, while Thompson and his companion are looking down from the press box at the crowd, they see “[p]ink faces with a stylish Southern sag, old Ivy styles, seersucker coats and button-down collars” (20). Such descriptions are uncommonly detailed and specific for a sports journalistic piece, and Thompson quite clearly foreshadows the socio-critical nature of his sports article, “The Kentucky Derby.”

The narrator spends much time describing those of the societal elite who visit and attend the Kentucky Derby in their own special manner, separated from the crowd, high up in the stands and bars, drunkenly socializing. The narrator also focusses some of his attention on the persona and practices of his illustrator, Ralph Steadman. Many more peripheral matters, or so they seem, are put at the forefront of the article. From the start, the whole article is about anything but the actual Kentucky Derby horse race, as a sporting event. Thompson reported on America in this style from the beginning of his career, beginning with “The Kentucky Derby,” and did not stop until his passing, on 20 February 2005.

The article is considered to be the original piece of work in what is now commonly known as Gonzo Journalism, Thompson’s personal stylistic creation. Many of Thompson’s works after “The Kentucky Derby” share the same or many similar features. Works like *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1971) and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* (1973) are just two noteworthy examples of this Gonzo-style journalism. Unique and

unconventional, Gonzo Journalism features many stylistic and structural choices that are particular for its creator and main proponent: Hunter S. Thompson. That said, Thompson's Gonzo style shares features with the contemporary New Journalism. Therefore, a study of "The Kentucky Derby" and the Gonzo style would not be complete without also exploring and examining the genre of New Journalism. Moreover, both journalistic styles heavily depend and were directly influenced by their *zeitgeist*, the 1960s era of the counterculture and the feeling of historical socio-political change in the nation. In the case of Gonzo Journalism, more so than New Journalism, the Gonzo style of journalism was also influenced by, and dependent on, other extratextual contexts, such as Thompson's own background and experience, which also will be explored in the following chapters.

Chapter one will discuss the key concepts of perspective and context in relation to textual interpretation. It will show how these concepts greatly influence both the author and the reader of a text in how they perceive the topics of a text, both as pre-text for the author, as well as text topic for the reader. The chapter will claim that perspective is an individual matter in the context of interpretation. Context, in turn, will be shown to be a participating factor in a wide and almost omni-present way. Context informs perspective while also shaping it. Meanwhile it is part of the text as well as the life that informs the text.

Chapter two will explore extratextual contexts such as: the socio-political situation in the US, where it is relevant to the content of "The Kentucky Derby," Gonzo Journalism as a specific style, and Thompson the writer and persona. It will show how influential the 1960s were in determining Thompson's writing topics. That

era also provided the author with many matters to critique on a socio-cultural and socio-political level, e.g. mainstream American culture and what Thompson perceived to be its corruption and obsession with money. This chapter is meant to provide the historical (extra)textual context of “The Kentucky Derby” and will demonstrate the main concepts discussed in chapter one.

Chapter three will focus on the key features and the cultural significance of New Journalism first and subsequently Gonzo Journalism. A comparison between the two will reveal how the Gonzo style was specifically and uniquely particular to Thompson. It will also define and explain the features of the Gonzo style needed to analyze “The Kentucky Derby.”

Chapter four presents the analysis of “The Kentucky Derby,” the case study in this thesis. Thompson’s choice and employment of Gonzo-style features will be highlighted. Furthermore, these features will be linked to the passages in which they function. This linking will then be interpreted in order to explain what Thompson, the subjective reporter, is saying about his topics of interest. What the analysis will show is that Thompson, in his way, mainly conveys his socio-cultural and political criticism of mainstream sports culture on a micro-level. On a larger scale, the macro-level, Thompson uses the Kentucky Derby event to voice his discontentment with US society, culture and politics. He refers critically to greed and corruption, US racial affairs and matters of inequality within society.

In other words, the overall analysis of “The Kentucky Derby” will be done through a textual approach which will mainly focus on style and content. The text’s topic, the Kentucky Derby horse racing event, and Gonzo Journalism’s stylistic



features will be explored in relation to the historical context of the “Sixties” era as well as the personal context of both author and implied reader.

The analysis of “The Kentucky Derby” will show that Thompson uses the topic of the Kentucky Derby horse racing event to not only criticize the socio-cultural and political aspect of the event, but also as a symbolic representation of the USA as a whole, socio-culturally and politically speaking. What Thompson observes in the microcosm of the Kentucky Derby he also observes on a larger scale in his country, the USA. Overall, what Thompson is mostly concerned with is the need for change, through the radical counterculture, in relation to the corruption in main-stream culture. Ultimately, what can be understood in the larger context is that the counterculture, New Journalism and Thompson through his Gonzo Journalism all show a radical and idiosyncratic perspective on the status quo.

The conclusion will establish a grounded argument for the importance and relevance of the textual context and extratextual context to a proper understanding of Gonzo Journalism. Also, a clear description and explanation of the relevant journalistic styles will have been provided, both in terms of similarities and differences between respectively Gonzo Journalism and New Journalism. The analysis part will have demonstrated how Thompson has successfully implemented his Gonzo journalistic method to address specific issues in an unexpected format (sports article and literary techniques). It will also have shown how Thompson’s method and style achieves a certain means, and what these means possibly are and eventually achieve its purpose.

## Chapter 1. Perspective and Contexts

### Introduction

Let us sketch a simple scenario. We take a pencil and draw a number on a flat surface: a piece of paper lying on a desk. We pick the numeral that could represent two different numbers, in this case the 6 or 9. These particular numerals are picked because of their ambiguous appearance. After all, the *nine* is simply the number *six* upside down, orthographically. Different people will see different numbers, depending on where they stand in relation to the flat surface on which the number is written. Those looking at the drawing from one angle will see the following shape: 6. While others looking at it from the opposite angle will see that the same drawing is shaped as a 9. Ultimately, whether the shape drawn on the flat surface is a 9 or a 6 depends on *point-of-view* (pov) and *perspective*. In other words, what you see depends on the way you look at things. Perspective informs perception.

What can be concluded from the above example is that both claims of what the shape of the drawing represents are equally viable. Both perceptions of the shape drawn on the flat surface are truthful. If viewpoints are changed, the outcome of what is perceived also changes. A person's perception then depends on his viewpoint, or better said: perspective. This also counts in regard to literature. The pov and/or perspective greatly determines what is perceived by whom. Regarding the interpretation of literary texts, McCormick and Waller explain that the reader's pov and thus "different readings of texts" in part arise "because each reader brings to a text a different set of culturally conditioned experiences" (201). These experiences

inform perspective. Perspective is based on a person's circumstances and experiences. Matters like age and personal history, environment and culture, religion and moral convictions shape a person's disposition. This disposition, in turn, is expressed through the person's perspective.

### **1.1. Perspective, POV and Perception**

The formal literary concepts of pov and perspective play a significant role in Thompson's works of Gonzo Journalism. The difference between the two in this thesis is of a technical matter, in that: pov is used to establish the teller of the story. In other words, the focus of the use of pov is on who is telling the story. It is the "central narrative perspective" (Rabatel 79). Perspective is the storyteller's attitude toward a story, as McCormick and Waller explain in their work. This attitude is formed by a person's culture, their upbringing, and also personal experiences. In this thesis the notion of perspective is an overarching concept that inherently includes pov. When speaking specifically of pov, then pov will be explicitly mentioned. Perspective then is considered to be partly an overarching term that includes the more limited term point of view.

The concepts of pov and perspective together can be considered themes in themselves, rather than critical tools with which to discover possible themes. For example, one significant theme in "The Kentucky Derby" is pov/perspective. It features as a *leitmotif* throughout the spectator's description of and response to the sporting event. At this horse racing event it appears that being seen is as important as doing the seeing or watching. Furthermore, Thompson features in the account as

both the protagonist and the narrator. The writer's self-positioning as the protagonist and first-person narrator leads to a narrative situation where everything told and shown in the report comes from Thompson's perspective. It is his pov, his perspective, and ultimately his perception that tells and shows the story as it is relayed to the reader. This makes Thompson, as the narrator, an unreliable one, because he does not speak and acts in "accordance with the norms of the work," or genre, according to Wayne C. Booth (158-159). Thompson's role as first-person narrator and protagonist makes his position unusually subjective when it concerns non-fiction, specifically a sports article. This hyper-subjectivity, however, helps Thompson the private person to voice his critical opinion on the Kentucky Derby, the US south, the people there and ultimately the US at large. Thompson's hyper-subjectivity also allows the journalist to avoid a detached attitude towards those things that are considered to be universally human. It shows a degree of involvement, both in terms of participatory journalism as well as "citizen's duty."

One last example of the role that pov and perspective play that needs mentioning, regarding their thematic importance to Thompson's text, is that of Thompson's use of a companion. Ralph Steadman, the British illustrator, accompanied Thompson during the event and was officially sanctioned to do the illustrations for the story. Other perspectives than Thompson's, and in a far lesser sense Steadman's, are hard to come by. It is their respective points of view that inform the reader of the events in the story. Thompson's perspective forms his perception. As a result, the implied reader perceives this Gonzo works, i.e. "The Kentucky Derby," through the perception of the writer of these works, who is

himself the protagonist and narrator. The fact that the first-person narrator reports his experiences in the story based on his particular personal perceptions and perspective presumably results in a one-sided perspective and a sense of the narrator's unreliability. McCormack and Waller's earlier quoted statement concerning the culturally conditioned experience of writing and reading supports this to some degree. Just as readers have their own particular reading of text, so do storytellers and writers have their own particular way of conveying lived experience, such as a real-life high-profile sporting event like the Kentucky Derby.

What is more, active readers have their own perspective, developed by their own personal experience, circumstances, beliefs and culture. Again, Wallace and McCormick clearly address and support this view. As an example it is possible to point towards George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). Since its publication, it has been understood by different readers as a critique of both right-wing and left-wing political extremism. Currently, there is much discontent among the general public about different happenings that affect us, e.g. government restrictions on public life due to the corona pandemic, fake news allegations regarding news media, and distrust of technology. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is often cited as a source that governments and other parties use the pandemic, the media, and technology to scare the public and spy on them. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* famous phrase "BIG BROTHER IS WATCHING YOU" is often cited by run-of-the-mill self-declared whistleblowers in reference to governments. It is a heated form of finger pointing in which personal perspectives are projected onto the text. What is often ignored in these simplistic interpretations of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is one's own role in society, i.e. the protagonist

as passive anti-hero. In any case, these whistleblowers on social media clearly only highlight a single, and quite simplistic, aspect of the novel. As readers they are just as unreliable as Thompson's narrator. It is impossible to fully objectively interpret "The Kentucky Derby," just as Thompson is in narrating the story. Perspective then "emerges as the central concept for explaining narration" (Bordwell 4).

It is Thompson's pov as first-person narrator that expresses his perspective-steered perception through narration. Understanding Thompson's perspective means being able to explain Thompson's narration. The critical reader, however, should not stop there. It is not enough to just understand where Thompson is coming from, so to speak, and realize that Thompson's subjectivity makes him unreliable. The reader's own perception and/or interpretation is just as unreliable or maybe even more so. After all, a reader's own personal biases already predetermine his perceptions. This means that perspective is limited, at least in depth. In other words, perspective is a framework with limitations. The characters in "The Kentucky Derby" are limited as well. They are only human too, imperfect and restricted. Even a critical reader's interpretation of a text is also somewhat unreliable, or at least subjective, to some degree.

It is not merely the writer's choices that lead to specific interpretations of their text. In the process of interpretation, "reading is a process of re-creation" (Benstock 72). As was suggested above, the readers' individual perspectives will influence any interpretation of any text. The reader himself is an active participant in finding meaning in a text, if only because of his own subjective perspective-steered perception/interpretation. Or as Jeffery puts it: "cooperation has to be between

reader and text. Some of the essential information is brought to the text by its readers, who have to cooperate with it actively to create meaning together, rather than passively absorbing meaning from the text” (Jeffery 88). How this cooperation works is further discussed below. However, it needs to be said that, firstly, there is the text as a source to retrieve meaning from. The meaning in it is partly determined by the text’s writer and all his conscious and sub-conscious factors of which his perspective consists. Secondly, there is the reader who has their own preconceived notions and biases that they bring to the text while interpreting it, equally consciously as well as sub-consciously.

In relation to Thompson, Gonzo Journalism, and “The Kentucky Derby,” the role of perception is to tell and show the reader what Thompson observes during the horse racing event and how he interprets those observations. The reader is taken on a journey of sights and images, sounds or lack of, and other impressions. Thompson relays his perceptions to the reader as he is experiencing the event and other happenings before and after it. The reader in turn brings to the text their own biased perspective.

This leads to the third factor in the text-reader cooperation, which has not been mentioned before: the notion of contexts. So, text, reader and context(s) provide a well-rounded and thorough framework to interpret a text meaningfully. In the case of a work of Gonzo Journalism this is even more apparent. In a Gonzo work, the narrator is also the protagonist, which makes it a highly subjective piece of journalism. This subjectivity makes a Gonzo piece personal because the writer’s own perspective is foregrounded. This display invites the implied reader to get involved,

to judge, to evaluate. This interplay between writer and reader through a piece of Gonzo Journalism makes it necessary to take into account the importance of perspective of all parties involved when analyzing a work of Gonzo.

## **1.2. Contexts**

Roughly speaking “context” can be divided in two categories, i.e. intra-textual and extratextual contexts. Intra-textual context deals with units of discourse within their linguistic surroundings. The notion of extratextual context involves contexts that are text-external but in some degree are needed to interpret a text in a more inclusive way. After all, to analyze a text for its meaning a text is dependent on its use in an appropriate context (Verdonk 19). The linguistic content of a text then is not solely responsible for conveying the meaning. Text-external contexts then co-determine the meaning of a text and perhaps even linguistic units in said text.

### **1.2.1. Intra-textual Context and Extratextual Context**

A well-rounded and thorough analysis of, for example, “The Kentucky Derby” has as much to do with the text’s content, the quality of the critical reading done by the reader, as it does with text-external contextual factors, e.g. the writer of “The Kentucky Derby.” Wallace summarizes the deconstructionists’ view, which emerged in the 1960s, by explaining that “a writer’s circumstances and identities are indeed a part of the ‘context’ of a text” (140). In the case of Thompson, this goes even further because he makes himself deliberately part of the text, thus being part of its intra-textual context.



Some notable text-external contexts are time period, location, culture, socio-politics, and not in the least Thompson the writer. These contextual categories are, however, all part of both the intra-textual and extra-textual context. This is because Thompson as a private person, as well as a writer, is part of these contexts. He might not have been an integral part of the elite culture of Louisville, Kentucky, or its horse racing world, but he was in some manner, as a journalist, part of the scene. Also, Thompson was actively part of US national culture as a young professional writer and journalist. Thompson was also part of the counterculture, more or less, both privately as well as professionally. In his semi-autobiographical novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1972), Thompson refers to his modest partaking in the counterculture on multiple occasions, e.g. in the famous "wave-speech." If there ever has been a journalist who could be judged to be part of the text and the text's context than surely Thompson would fit.

Thompson's style of highly subjective, participatory and immersion-prone literary reporting makes him a key factor and relevant aspect of his Gonzo texts. In other words, none of Thompson's Gonzo texts can be read, discussed and/or analyzed without taking the writer, his world, and experience of reality into consideration. This is so because the writer in Gonzo texts is almost always the main character as well as narrator. Any discussion of a Gonzo text is prone to involve Thompson and his role in the text and his being outside the text. The motive to write and operate in such an emphasized subjective manner is presumably the need to

voice his socio-cultural and political critique. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3.

Thompson seems to be the main extratextual and overly present intra-textual factor. And much can be said of and about Thompson the person and writer and character. As a matter of fact, there is much scholarship on the life and times of Thompson. Several bibliographies, both popular as well as academic, have been written and published by a variety of authors and publishers. Luckily, this takes away of the risk of getting side-tracked when discussing Thompson's first widely acknowledged work of Gonzo, i.e. "The Kentucky Derby."

This thesis will take into account the context of Thompson the writer and protagonist and narrator. There is another context that will play a significant role, namely the historical context. It is inseparably linked to Thompson and Gonzo Journalism. Whatever is told and shown in the Gonzo text "The Kentucky Derby" is unavoidably going to involve Thompson and with him his world at the time. Thompson's intra-textual context of point of view and the extra-textual context of history are greatly influential to the text, the reader, and the reader's analysis of the text.

## Chapter 2. Historical Context: The Turbulent “Sixties”

### Introduction

While the title of the case study, “The Kentucky Derby,” seems straight-forward and obvious about the text’s content. Anyone reading “The Kentucky Derby” sooner or later will realize it is about anything but the Kentucky Derby, the horse race. The article is mainly about what is happening during the event, as the second half of the title reveals: “...is Decadent and Depraved.” Thompson, in his own way, tells and shows the contexts of the Kentucky Derby. The critical reader needs to be aware of the way in which “The Kentucky Derby” responds critically towards facets of mainstream American society and have knowledge about historical and locational contexts. Some of these facets can be described as the derby visitors, their local culture, the emphasis on “winning” in this culture and the prevalence of greed. In “The Kentucky Derby” Thompson mentions several persons, groups, and events that are specific for their time and location. Stereotypical southern US American characters like Jimbo, social reform groups like the Black Panthers, and the Vietnam War are a few but significant presences of the 1960s USA mentioned in the article. It would be lacking in effort, overview, and insight to analyze Thompson’s text without being aware of the extra-textual contexts of genre, time, place, culture, socio-politics, and others.

Keeping in mind the exhaustiveness of the complex historical and locational context of the USA in the 1960s, it can be said that the extra-textual context that is discussed in this chapter consists of significant events, entities, notions and cultural

phenomena that are relevant to “The Kentucky Derby.” In it the Vietnam War/Conflict and Nixon’s involvement are highlighted. The Black Panthers in relation to impending yet fictitious riots at the derby venue are falsely predicted. Also, local (Louisville, Kentucky) culture and society are heavily criticized. And lastly, Thompson does not overlook the current American sports culture and its greed. These specific contexts are not to be observed strictly separate from one another because they are all aspects of the larger context of the USA in the 1960s. For example, the always implicit mention of greed does not only occur in relation to sports culture in “The Kentucky Derby.” It is also linked to Nixon at a certain point. Even Thompson is an additional aspect of context within the larger context.

Thompson features as both narrator and protagonist in his texts and thus inherently becomes part of the intra-textual context. Additionally, Thompson-as-writer of “The Kentucky Derby” is alive and actively present in the day and age in which the text has been written. And because of this concurrence he also becomes part of the extra-textual context. Still a relatively young man, it is easily imaginable that the “Sixties” had their effect on and a finger in further shaping Thompson’s personality, thoughts and emotions, political beliefs and convictions. It remains to be said that it is not unlikely that the Sixties had a hand in Thompson’s leftist-anarchist character (Mosser 88). In short, a text like “The Kentucky Derby” that is overly intertwined with its author and *zeitgeist* needs to be analyzed within its specific contextual framework.

This chapter sets out the significant contextual framework. It will answer questions relating to extra-textual contexts: what are they and why are they relevant?

In other words, this paper's case study, "The Kentucky Derby," will be brought into relation with its *zeitgeist*-specific circumstances because it cannot be read separately from it. What is needed then before the analysis of "The Kentucky Derby" can be done is to explicate and discuss the relevant categories that compile the extra-textual context(s).

## **2.1. Historical context: The Sixties**

It is relevant to critically explore the historical climate of Thompson's America. This view will inform us as to what was happening in the US at the time Thompson was writing "The Kentucky Derby." The following sections will provide an overview of the historical context of Sixties US history. Socio-political and socio-cultural issues and events will be given attention first before the chapter shifts to a focus on Thompson's role and place in this decade.

As mentioned before, the period of US history of most relevance here is the 1960s. Technically speaking the 1960s run from 1961 to 1970, but as a cultural decade this differs slightly. Monteith states that "[t]here is a significant difference between a rhetorical Sixties and a historical 1960s" (1). She further develops this argument in a direction that is not yet relevant for now. Her statement does signify, however, that there is a notion of the 1960s that is more than merely historical. The Sixties to her was a time period of a rhetorical nature, meaning it is a phenomenon of which much has been spoken, told and written. This coincides with this paper's notion of the Sixties as a cultural decade. A decade of which society has decided to view it. It is no longer an objective view of the 1960s. This paper will not concern itself too much

with setting immovable boundaries of what should be considered to be the timeframe of the Sixties, unless certain topics need it, e.g. the notion of counterculture of the 1960s.

The "Sixties" as a cultural era is inherently linked to the "hippies" and its "flower power" movement. Of course, the Sixties era revolves around much more than solely the hippies and their movement. There is also the notion of the "counterculture" and its broader reform movements. The term counterculture was coined by historian Theodor Roszak when he wrote the first study of the counterculture: *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1969). The term "counterculture" defined rather generally can be described as a subculture wherein its members "hold beliefs or engage in practices that are opposed to or radically different from mainstream values or practices" (Rorabaugh 3). In the Sixties there were quite a few members of subcultures who fit this description. An open-minded view of the counterculture can view it as a collection of a variety of movements that sought to change society, politics and culture (Rorabaugh 1-2), e.g. civil rights movements that were overly represented in and by the African-American community. When combining these descriptions of the counterculture it is easily induced that the counterculture can be seen as the main constant in the Sixties.

The start of the cultural decade known as the Sixties is hard to determine as culture is dynamic and never stagnant. It could be argued that this countercultural decade started with the final days of the Beatniks. Matusow in his brief historical overview "Rise and Fall of the Counterculture" concludes that the 1960s counterculture started with the rise of the hippies (Chafe and Sitkoff 325-37). He

assesses that the hippies added drugs and rock & roll to the Beatniks' "mystic quest" which in turn was added to the 1930s black hipster's way of living. Rorabaugh goes even further to state that the beginning of US countercultures can be found in "Greenwich Village in New York during the early 1900s" (3). What can be concluded from this is that the rise of the counterculture specific to the Sixties started when the hippies got involved.

The possible end of the Sixties starts with "the break-up of the Beatles and the expansion of the '27 Club', with the deaths of Brian Jones, Jimi Hendrix, Janis Joplin and Jim Morrison between 1969 and 1972" which marked "the end of whatever 'innocence' remained in youth counter-culture" (Gair 9). Of course, there is never a specific delineation where a certain era ends and another begins. Changes happen over time and often move so slowly it is hard to pinpoint when change happened, especially when it concerns a cultural change in time. Another view of the end of the Sixties counterculture can be found in Thompson's most famous work. In his novel *Fear and Loathing: A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream* (1972), Thompson, in his famous "wave-speech," views the end of the youth counterculture had happened quite a few years earlier. He writes:

Strange memories on this nervous night in Las Vegas. Five years later? Six? It seems like a lifetime, or at least a Main Era – the kind of peak that never comes again. San Francisco in the middle sixties was a very special time and place to be a part of. Maybe it meant something. Maybe not, in the long run . . . but no explanation, no mix of words or music or memories can touch that sense of

knowing that you were there and alive in that corner of time and the world.

Whatever it meant. . . .

History is hard to know, because of all the hired bullshit, but even without being sure of “history” it seems entirely reasonable to think that every now and then the energy of a whole generation comes to a head in a long fine flash, for reasons that nobody really understands at the time – and which never explain, in retrospect, what actually happened.

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

So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high-water mark – that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back. (66-68)

The reader can conclude that Thompson puts the end of the countercultural Sixties around 1967-68. While being seemingly indulgent with Thompson’s above quote, there are quite the number of significant comments in the speech relevant to other topics appearing in this chapter and in the thesis as a whole.

Coming back to the central topic of this thesis, it remains to be said that both Gair and Thompson are talking about the counterculture that is represented by the “Flower Power” generation part of the larger countercultural movement. Also, these two differing views come from two different people with each their own particular



interest in the subject. Gair is an academic scholar specializing in American counterculture whereas Thompson is a Gonzo journalist and eye witness who also experienced the Sixties. It is again all a matter of perspective.

It can at least be said that a few years into the 1960s societal, cultural, and political norms were questioned and challenged by certain groups in the US, e.g. norms considering gender and race equality, norms regarding authority, both governmental as well as parental. This questioning and challenging happened nation-wide but it was mostly so the case in high-density areas where demographic groups of the US population, mostly students and the African-American population, were on the forefront of the struggle. McCleary jokingly remarks that “some of us lived in the Midwest and missed it” (xi), referring to the hippie movement of the era who did much of the questioning and challenging of traditional authority in the Sixties. The effects were noticeable throughout the US society, and even beyond.

Quite a few radical and drastic changes and issues were taking place in the US during the Sixties or as McCleary without elaborating says that “[t]he most prominent aspect of the hippie era was the emergence of new ideas and experimentation on social, political religious, and environmental issues” (xiii). Some of these issues were politically inclined, think of the assassination of John F. Kennedy in 1963 and the civil rights struggle. These events had a lasting effect, and were impactful on the national memory. Other changes, in turn, were far less long-lasting on US society and its culture as a whole, e.g. the hippie movement. In either way, all these events left their mark in history because of their impact on the individual as

well as the collective memory of a society. The Sixties then appear to have been quite impactful on the USA in terms of society, politics and culture.

## **2.2. Historical Context: Society and Politics**

“The shot heard round the world” (l. 1), from Ralph Waldo Emerson’s “Concord Hymn” (1837), is a phrase in the US that is of historical and political significance. It refers to the opening shots in battle which began the American Revolutionary War and led to the creation of the country now known as the United States of America. Out of violence a new and influential nation was born. As of that day the USA was not a stranger to violence, and notably violence of a political nature. The Civil War is one example of a time period in US history where violence was omni-prevalent. Another example would be the US in general dealing with American natives in relation to US land expansion. The subsequent assassination of President Abraham Lincoln, who ended the war and re-united the States, only added to the violent character of US politics and perhaps even culture. The 1960s were not exempt of this kind violence and further demonstrated how ingrained it seemed to be in US politics and culture.

In 1963, there were other shots heard, a set of three shots to be precise. All were fired from a book depository building in Dallas, Texas. These shots eventually killed the then current POTUS, John F. Kennedy. At the same time, US involvement in the political unrest in Vietnam increased and turned the situation into a full-blown war. Increasing numbers of US troops were sent to Vietnam by Kennedy’s successor, Lyndon B. Johnson. And Nixon, who succeeded Johnson, continued this trend for a

few years more until he decided to call all US military personnel back home. Political violence appears to play a significant role in US politics, and not just domestically as we can see (Encyclopedia Britannica Online).

The political violence did not end there. Two years later, Malcolm X, a popular African-American human and civil rights leader, was assassinated. Shortly after, two very notable assassinations occurred in the year 1968. There was the murder on Robert F. Kennedy, John F. Kennedy's younger brother, who was another politician who died because of his political views. Concurrently, Martin Luther King, again a prominent civil rights leader, was assassinated. These notable political assassinations, which differ in degree of their political nature, already make the Sixties seem as a very political and violent era. What further contributes to this violent nature of the era are the Black Panthers, the student protests, the music scene, the hippies even, and more. All will be discussed to some degree. Those contributing factors that are most relevant to Thompson and "The Kentucky Derby" will be given preference and prevalence.

Meanwhile the violence continued, both the political and physical sort. The aforementioned assassinated civil rights affiliated leaders were not accidentally both African American. The civil rights movement was spearheaded by social, political and religious leaders within the African-American community. It fought against racial segregation and for racial equality with all its associated causes. The movement mostly involved itself in peaceful marches, nonviolent protests and civil disobedience. Yet their protest marches often eventuated in attacks and beatings by the authorities in the form of police action. What is noteworthy about this instance is

that this time the violence did not come from a lone gunman, or any other outside party. This time the state itself was involved in domestic political violence. And it was not a single incident. Another a form of political violence by the hands of the state apparatus occurred at with student protests. During the protests on the campus of Kent State University the National Guard made itself guilty of killing four unarmed students and injuring more. This event has become known as the “Kent State Massacre.”

In the meantime, the socio-political turmoil, including violence, continued. Along with the growing civil rights movement, other movements sought to change the status quo, via protest, and sometimes forcefully. Under the broader banner of the counterculture, hippies, the anti-war movement, the psychedelic rock music scene, and even the media got involved in the socio-political struggles of the Sixties.

The above paragraphs refer to the idea that during the Sixties, significant change in the US often happened through overt protests, coupled with violence, in its many forms. Thompson himself was not a stranger to violence. He was a big fan of firearms and owned several of them throughout his lifetime. Thompson also used these firearms both in terms of target practice as well as for recreational use. Thompson, however, was also a violent person of sorts in another way. It could be argued that Thompson with Gonzo Journalism, along with the New Journalists, broke from conventional mainstream journalism in order to attack the status quo. This can be seen not only as a parallel to the countercultural movement but even as a part of it. Thompson’s Gonzo Journalism and Wolfe’s New Journalism appeared to

change journalism is significant ways. More on this will be discussed in chapter three.

### **2.3. Historical Context: Society and (Counter)Culture**

As the 1950s came to an end so did the Beat Generation fade out of the picture. They were practically replaced by the counterculture of the 1960s. MacFarlane confirms this assessment when he states that “the anti-establishment Beats greatly influenced the counterculture that followed”; it was eventually “the counterculture ... that became the epicenter of American social debate” (9). Also known as “the beatniks,” this generation of 1950s youth preceded the Sixties counterculture in questioning and challenging archaic and antiquated norms of society.

Thompson, in an article for the *National Observer*, wrote a short piece about the Beatniks in 1960's San Francisco. He writes that “[a]s recently as 1960, San Francisco was the capital of the beat generation” (Thompson, “Beatniks” 398). Thompson further adds that “[i]t was a time for breaking loose from the old codes, for digging new sounds and new ideas, and for doing everything possible to unnerve the establishment” (ibid.). With this eyewitness testimony in mind it could be argued that the counterculture actually included the Beat Generation of the 1950s, thereby preceding the Sixties, a decade famous and notorious for the emergence and establishment of the counterculture. After all, “[the] most prominent aspect of the hippie era was the emergence of new ideas and experimentation on social, political, religious, and environmental issues” (McCleary xiii). Freer views the Beats as “pre-countercultural” and “proto-countercultural” (13). This means that she excludes this

group as part of the definition of counterculture. And so does this paper. The Beats, as a counter-culturally inclined movement of the 1950s, is out of the reach of this paper.

As an oppositional movement going against mainstream culture the counterculture movement “included a variety of important groups in addition to the hippies, including student activists, civil rights groups like the Black Panthers, and anarchist groups like the Hells Angels motorcycle club” (Issit xi). This view is taken up in this paper partly because Freer appears to reinforce McCreary’s assessment of the counterculture as “heterogeneous oppositional groups and cultural innovators” (Freer 4). The more relevant groups in regard to Thompson’s “The Kentucky Derby,” are deceptively difficult to identify. The essay does not mention any of the countercultural groups specifically, except for the Black Panthers. However, the Black Panthers do not actually materialize in Thompson’s sports article. Thompson makes a variety of references to the counterculture without exploring it specifically. Written in 1970, the references are perhaps quite obvious for the reader of “The Kentucky Derby” at the time.

## **2.4. Hunter S. Thompson**

In the first chapter of William Stephenson’s *Gonzo Republic: Hunter S. Thompson's America* there is an extensive exposition of Thompson’s early life and career. It details his childhood in Louisville, Kentucky and his development as a writer and journalist. Bill Reynolds in his contribution to the inaugural issue of *Literary Journalism Studies*

even discusses Thompson's work in chronological order to describe the development Thompson's writing to eventually become Gonzo Journalism.

In "The Kentucky Derby," Thompson reveals some of his private life, just before derby day, when Steadman and he have dinner with Thompson's brother and the brother's wife. Thompson briefly confides in Steadman when he tells his companion that a close family member has been admitted into a mental institution. To the reading audience, Thompson, without much hesitation, recounts that he has actually lived in Louisville as a youth. Beyond these brief but significant personal facts, surprisingly little in the article concerns Thompson's private life. This seems uncharacteristic for a journalist and writer who puts himself in the center of the narrative thereby making the journalistic piece a subjective literary work.

Thompson and Steadman in search for the right subject for Steadman's drawings also come across an old high school friend of sorts. This time there is no social interaction with this figure from Thompson's private life and past. Other than these instances, Thompson only refers to his past living in Kentucky when searching for subjects to illustrate. He relates to the reader, without addressing them, that the subject(s) has to be a "face that [he]'d seen a thousand times at every Derby [he]'d ever been to" (17). This line does not explicitly speak of Thompson's past in Louisville. However, it does point at Thompson's experience with and at the Kentucky Derby. It suffices to say that Thompson's personal past and his pre-Gonzo era visits to the Kentucky Derby are not of immediate relevance here. What is of relevance is Thompson's relation to the historical, socio-cultural and political context at the time he wrote "The Kentucky Derby" sports article.

As to the relevance of Thompson the person and writer in relation to the historical and socio-cultural and political context, Stephenson says the following:

Throughout his life, Thompson's work reflected his struggle for self-determination. His writing was founded on his idiosyncratic but consistently humanist and individualist interpretation of the values that had informed the Founding Fathers of the US, which had later been adapted by their descendants like Thoreau and Emerson. (16)

As such, Thompson is revealed to be a staunchly American writer tied to a literary tradition. As with Transcendentalists like Thoreau and Emerson,

in Thompson, the personal and political were intimately linked: his quest for individual freedom, which involved not only egocentricity but also excoriating self-criticism, went hand in hand with his mission to criticize and even change the once-great Republic of which he found himself a part. (Stephenson 16)

Stephenson underscores the idea that Thompson was an individualist with humanistic convictions. He was also an anarchist, in the sense that he rejected authority and especially those that abandoned the original historic ideas of "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" on which his country, the USA, was founded. Thompson subscribed to an ideology that was modelled after the libertarian ideals of the US -which in turn were based on the revolutionary ideas of French libertarian, egalitarian and solidarity ideals.

Thompson's challenged the "the establishment through his subversive, satirical writing and political activism" but he also "scorned the counterculture's naïve belief that it could transform society through an infusion of peace, love and



dope” (Stephenson 6). Clearly, Thompson did not subscribe to the dominant political ideology, as embodied by US America’s political institutions of his time; nor did he completely adhere to the dissident ideals propagated by the intellectuals of the counterculture, like Herbert Marcuse and Norman O. Brown. This is what made him, next to his Gonzo writing style, all the more idiosyncratic. Thompson fitted the “Sixties” in the sense that he agreed with the counterculture, politically speaking. Equality and freedom for all, the legalizing of illegal substances, and a distaste for blind capitalism were, to name but a few, opinions he shared with the counterculture of his time, as his biographers have revealed.

Thompson for a few years was even part of the counterculture, as he quite clearly suggests in the “wave-speech” quoted above. Furthermore, Thompson, as did the counterculture, disagreed with the official institutions of the government and often criticized and ridiculed them. Nixon, for instance, is often Thompson’s target in several of his Gonzo writings, “The Kentucky Derby” included. On a last note Stephenson also points out that “[t]he decade of the hippies, LSD, Vietnam and the Civil Rights Movement offered many opportunities to live out” his own “idiosyncratic interpretation of Thomas Jefferson’s creed of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (5). In other words, Thompson was a freedom loving person. He loved the freedom to be his own person and have his own opinion on matters. The counterculture’s love of freedom and his happened to coincide at the right time and place. There was not only a common enemy but also a common goal.

What makes the counterculture movement so significant is that it deliberately and consciously adopted a dissident perspective of mainstream US American society

and politics. Again, Thompson and his idiosyncratic Gonzo Journalism parallels this perspective. In addition they were also part of it. Thompson, though his Gonzo writing, might even have informed and inspired the counterculture at some point. What can be said for sure is that Thompson and Gonzo Journalism coincided with a number of the counterculture's beliefs and convictions.

## Chapter 3. Journalism as Context

### Introduction

John C. Hartsock has noted that literary journalism arose specifically in reaction to the alienating effects of the “modern journalistic style” on its practitioners, as well as on the subjects of their accounts and their readers” (qtd. in McKeen 2012, 24). This rise of literary journalism as a reaction to alienation appears to be a timeless one.

Fishkin states that 1800s journalists like Walt Whitman and Mark Twain also abandoned their journalistic profession. They became creative writers, not only because of censorship and boredom, but also out of “a sense that conventional journalism could engage readers mind and emotions in only very limited ways” (7).

As creative writers they could produce works that avoided previous specific censorship, beat the “boredom” of mainstream journalism caused by slow times, and engage readers on a level that conventional journalism prohibited them from doing, e.g. reporting on certain supposedly less news-worthy subjects, “the extravagant claims to authoritativeness,” or “the failure to challenge the reader to think for himself” (Fishkin 8). In short, conventional journalism for these writers fell short. It did not allow them the freedom to report the way they saw fit.

The 1960s New Journalists, like Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, and, to some degree, Hunter S. Thompson, reacted in similar ways as their predecessors did. The 1960’s journalistic innovators created their own form of journalism practice and became literary in their reporting.

### 3.1. Literary Journalism

Considering the adjective of “literary” in literary journalism it is a swift assumption to make that these counter journalists’ reactions had more to do with form than substance. This assumption is not necessarily wrong, but it is inadequate. We will see with the discussion of the New Journalism that some journalists focused more on form and aesthetics while others committed themselves to a change of content and relevancy. In other words, the latter group told different stories while keeping the literary angle of reporting.

Next to a focus on aesthetics and news content there is also a significant difference between conventional and mainstream journalism on the one side and literary journalism and New Journalisms on the other, namely: the difference regarding objectivity as opposed to subjectivity. The literary journalisms of the 1960s especially stepped away from objectivity into the realm of subjectivity. Hunter S. Thompson was one of the most subjectively inclined journalist of the New Journalism era. Over the years he developed his journalistic writing to the end product of what is now called Gonzo Journalism. Thompson’s turn to subjectivity gave him the ability to express his alternative, idiosyncratic perspective of mainstream American culture.

How forms of journalism developed to this point is of much contextual value, historically speaking, if the discussion in this paper is centered on literary journalism and its forms. The discussion here, however, is not. This paper concerns itself with the literary notion of Gonzo Journalism and its specific stylistic traits in its temporal and locational surroundings. It stands to reason, therefore, to limit this investigation regarding literary journalism to its style and substance in the relevant time(s) and

place(s). Sims appears to agree with this stance and says the following about it: “We need to connect [literary journalistic] works produced to the culture and the context of their time” (10). It is the assumption in this paper that Thompson’s “The Kentucky Derby” is a work of Gonzo Journalism and, therefore, a significant example of literary journalism specific to its time and place. All of this means that this chapter will deal with those forms of literary journalisms that were present and relevant to the Sixties.

As to literary journalism in the wider scope regarding the field of reporting it remains to be said that forms of it were “a significant form of cultural expression in the twentieth century but [have been] either ignored, mislabeled, or misread” (Connery 6). He further adds that it is hard to define literary journalism. He opines that it is better to list the characteristics as a definition. In other words, literary journalism has not been considered as a definite and established literary genre. This means, it existed and was recognizably present, but mainly because of its differences to conventional journalism. Literary journalism differed mostly in the category of focus. It focused mostly “on presenting impressions, details, and description not central to the typical newspaper report” (ibid.). It can be argued that the aims of this kind of journalism are to establish and evoke a different perspective of the subject written about. All the while literary journalism remains as a form of journalism. Literary journalism is characterized by other devices as well. It requires “immersion reporting, accuracy, careful structuring, and a lot of labor, no matter what medium is used” (Sims 11). These are some things that reappear when discussing the forms of literary journalism later in this chapter. The already mentioned characteristics of

literary journalism above are there to point out some of the central standards of this overarching label to other literary journalistic forms and methods. Other notable characteristics of this broad category include “immersion reporting, complicated structures, character development, symbolism, voice, a focus on ordinary people . . . and accuracy” (qtd. in Roiland 67). Of course these characteristics are still unspecified and leave enough to the imagination. It will show, nevertheless, that these elements recur in our discussion about Gonzo and New Journalism; including their respective traits and characteristics.

### 3.2. New Journalism

As the 1960s progressively became more turbulent, culturally, socially and politically, a form of literary journalism started to emerge and develop along with the times. Hollowell suggestively states that “the bizarre reality of American social life” resulted into “a group of reporters [begin] experimenting with fictional techniques in an effort to reconceive American journalism” (Ch. 2.1). As a result of this experimenting New Journalism emerged step by step taking its eventual form. According to Olster, New Journalism, and the nonfiction novel, were established as early as 1965 with Tom Wolfe’s “first essay collection, *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*, and the serialization of Truman Capote’s ‘In Cold Blood’ in *The New Yorker*” (44). Wolfe appears to support Olster’s assertion in an article for *The New Yorker* on the beginnings of New Journalism. He states that the “stir of New Journalism,” which was happening in the mid-1960s, was attributed to the two works, just mentioned, in the eyes of Dan Wakefield (20). Not only is Tom Wolfe one

of those two writers responsible for the stir of this new form of literary journalism, he is also commonly recognized to be the founder of New Journalism.

The socio-cultural and political turmoil of the Sixties was not the only reason Tom Wolfe and other writers developed a different way of reporting. Mosser states that Wolfe's promotion of the kinds of reporting he and other "writers were producing at the time reveals his *artistic* and political agenda" (*Participatory Journalism* 5; my emphasis). The "limitations of existing narrative forms" were one of "the primary impulses behind the emergence of New Journalism" (Duvall 44). Wolfe himself, a well-known dandy, wrote that "[r]eally stylish reporting was something no one knew how to deal with, since no one was used to thinking of reporting as having an esthetic dimension (20). This quote hints to an aesthetically inclined motivation for the invention or rediscovery of a form of journalism. A way of reporting that differed from conventional journalism through the use of literary techniques. Mosser adds to the former quote when he says that "Wolfe's promotion of the kinds of reporting he and other writers were producing at the time reveals his artistic and political agenda" (*Participatory Journalism* 5). So, it was not all personal politics and turbulent times of the 1960s that gave birth to New Journalism. New Journalism apparently fulfilled the need, of writers and readers alike, for a different way of reporting.

New Journalism then emerged from socio-cultural, political and especially aesthetical motivations to change the conventional journalistic ways of reporting. Whatever the exact or predominant motivation was it is safe to assume that New Journalism was created to express an alternative perspective on the status quo. This

status quo was, for the New Journalists, represented by both the political establishment as well as the institution(s) of conventional and mainstream journalism.

### **3.2.1. New Journalism Characteristics**

The difficulty in defining the alternative form of New Journalism that developed in the 1960s is partly due to the hybrid quality of the genre. New Journalism, like any form of literary journalism, combines journalistic reporting with literariness. For some, these two qualities cannot be combined into one concept. Mosser briefly discusses the arguments of these critics. What the discussion eventually comes down to is that some critics are opposed to the idea that “New Journalistic texts may be analyzed for their informative, thematic, and aesthetic values all at once” (*Participatory Journalism* 4). Differently put, these critics are of the opinion that literature equates to fiction and thereby cancelling the validity of the possibility of information and objectiveness.

Another reason why New Journalism is hard to define in a single outline, or in strictly framed terms, is because so many different writers were involved with it, e.g. Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Norman Mailer, Joan Didion, Gay Talese and many others. It is not hard to imagine that all these writers developed their own style of writing. Surely, these writers had overlapping stylistic features and literary techniques. Still, these writers were and are today all considered to be in one way or another working within the parameters of the New Journalism genre.



The happenstance of these like-minded writers and journalists of being grouped into the category of New Journalism is perhaps why Tom Wolfe is able to assign four main elemental narrative devices as central to the New Journalism. These devices include “scene-by-scene construction,” “recording dialogue in full,” “third-person point of view,” and “recording of detail” (Nicholson 56). New Journalists turned to these qualities in their attempt to reconstruct an experience as it might have unfolded. Following this presumption, in addition to Wolfe’s four principles, we could say that in all of these writers’ relevant works these devices are demonstrated to some degree.

The first device Wolfe views as essential to a work of New Journalism is the method of “scene-by-scene reconstruction.” This literary technique as the term suggests aims to *show* the reader the events rather than *tell* the story. It invites the reader to watch what is happening, not unlike a movie. In other words, scene-by-scene writing “create[s] sensual images in the mind of the reader” and gives “the reader a sense of action unfolding in front of them” (Caulley 429). This method is clearly aimed at giving New Journalism works the ability to provide the reading audience a visual experience, not unlike other literary works such as the novel or the poem.

Second on the list is “recording dialogue in full.” This is used to provide the reader with multiple points of view. Caulley explains that “conversations in the text can also give the reader emotion” thereby “making the text more memorable, more human, and more understandable” (430). This device makes the text more accessible to the average reader. It creates a sense of realism and authenticity. Real people are

more likely to read a text that comes across as real. Dialogues recorded in full appear to function as a tool to convey reality and truth. This literary device of “realistic dialogue, more than any other single device, truly involves the reader” (Nicholson 56).

Thirdly, there is the device of “recording of detail.” Nicholson explains that “it involves seemingly minute details of clothing, eating, every-day gestures ... and so forth ... to express the inner character, personality, the meaning of a character” (56). Not unlike the device(s) described immediately above, it is meant to conjure up images and emotions in the reader (Caulley 430). Getting into detail concretely creates a mood and a sense of realism.

Fourth and last is the technique of “selective pov.” It is an “effective technique for revealing every scene to the reader through the eyes of a particular character” (Nicholson 56). This way the reader is not distracted and annoyed by the egocentric author and at the same time the attention is not diverted from the real “star” (Caulley 442). Also, this third-person pov “can deal with more people, more descriptions of people, and more settings” (ibid.). It appears that this technique is one of more pragmatic use. Its distance to the topic yields more content in terms of quantity. At the same time the reader is not repeatedly confronted with the author’s self-positioned centrality. After all, nonfiction is about its topics and not the observing and participating entity. In this Thompson’s *Gonzo Journalism* takes a different perspective, as will be shown below.

### 3.3. Gonzo Journalism: Idiosyncrasy

While several scholars have tried to uncover the meaning of the word “gonzo,” none of them have succeeded indeterminately. For example, searches based on the etymology of the word have led to indefinite dictionary definitions.

Hirst was able to find out that “we know for sure from Thompson’s own memories and his biographers” that “it was first used by his friend, the Boston Globe Sunday Magazine editor Bill Cardoso” (Hirst 2). Other scholars who have written about Thompson, Gonzo Journalism and affiliated subjects do not appear to even undertake such a useless effort. It does not actually matter what the word itself precisely means. It might give an indication of the type of journalism it seemingly describes, but surely a single-word adjective with obscure origins cannot denote Thompson’s journalism as a whole.

Gonzo Journalism as a genre was different from its contemporary New Journalism, because “Thompson’s ‘gonzo’ was New Journalism with a twist” (Hirst 3). The twist, or rather twists, are found firstly and relatively dominantly in the hyper-subjectivity of Thompson as narrator and protagonist of his Gonzo pieces. Freemand and Le Rossignol explain that “[w]hile writers like Wolfe and Capote wrote almost exclusively in the third person, using multiple points of view to create their stories, Hunter S Thompson – using his particular style of Gonzo Journalism – projected the narrator into his stories” (4). Thompson is indeed almost always the narrator in his Gonzo pieces but he is also the protagonist of sorts, usually. As an effect, Thompson becomes not only part of the story but becomes the story itself, after all it is his subjective experience and perspective that reaches the reader. According to Mosser, Thompson decided to write this way because “[u]nlike Capote

and Wolfe, Thompson staked no claim to detachment or objectivity in his reporting” (*Participatory Journalism* 6). The reason for this is that Thompson “did not want the status of a writer to protect him from urgent national questions, from the responsibility to participate in and change history” (Stephenson 2). It can be argued, then, that Thompson as a writer as well as an individual felt involved in the stories he covered. Thompson placed himself in the center of his Gonzo pieces because he cared about what was happening in and to the US.

This hyper-subjective and participatory style of reporting, meant to criticize the reigning status quo of the establishment and its institutions, does not come without problems, especially for its audience. When the author of a piece of literary nonfiction not only participates but does so in a way that makes him the virtual topic, this makes him unreliable. McNair points out that because Thompson’s journalistic style stays “away from precise, factual reportage towards narratives” and combines facts with “something, if not fiction exactly” makes his work unreliable as to truth conveyed (582). It seems unlikely that a writer with Thompson’s status was unaware of this. What does seem likely though is that Thompson used his Gonzo method(s) as “a vehicle for outrageous semi-autobiographical narrative that did not cloak itself in any pretense of objectivity” (Stephenson 10). It is up to the implied readers, therefore, to make up their mind as to what is true or not in Gonzo pieces. It can also be argued that no account of journalistic writing is absolutely reliable. Facts, for instance, have little to no meaning if not put into their respective contexts. Depending on the presence of a particular context, certain facts can be interpreted in different ways.

Because of their literary nature Gonzo texts are far less straight-forward in their reporting of events. "The Kentucky Derby," for instance, is interpreted by Bruce-Novoa as a metaphor for the country (40). Chapter 4 will show how Bruce-Novoa's interpretation is quite a perceptive one, as there are many clues as to why he is right in asserting that the use of metaphor actually signifies certain hidden similarities between the event and the contemporary state of the US. Of course metaphor and hyper-subjectivity are only two literary devices that comprise Thompson's Gonzo Journalism literary style. There are more of these devices used in what is now widely considered "the first bona fide Gonzo text," i.e. "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" (Mosser, "Gonzo" 87).

### 3.3.1. Gonzo Journalism Characteristics

Now let us get to the essentials and elementals and determine what Gonzo Journalism is and encompasses in terms of its stylistic and structural characteristics. Overall, it can be said that Gonzo Journalism's "essence was its raw, un-edited quality" (Hirst 2). "The Kentucky Derby" is said to have been published in *Scanlan's Monthly* completely unedited. However, the claim that lack of editing was essential to Gonzo Journalism is overstated. According to Mosser, Thompson regarded *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1972), his most famous work of Gonzo Journalism, "as a failed experiment ... because he had to revise his prose to create the effect of raw spontaneity" ("Gonzo" 87). What can be claimed, then, is that according to Thompson works of Gonzo Journalism had to come across as raw and spontaneous.

The effect of which would be that of an unedited, real and true account of an event represented to the reader.

That is also why McKeen, more cautiously, states that Gonzo works “requires virtually no rewriting, with the reporter and the quest for information the focal point” (qtd. in Mosser, “Gonzo” 88). McKeen gives a more comprehensive list of notable characteristics typical for a work of Gonzo Journalism. His list includes the following: notes, sketches from other articles, transcribed interviews, verbatim telephone conversations, telegrams. While these are not necessarily literary techniques, they become so when they are represented in a literary piece. For Gonzo Journalism, then, these elementary characteristics become literary techniques employed in the expression of Thompson’s perspective, and thus part of Thompson’s idiosyncratic Gonzo style.

Other literary techniques mentioned are the notions of stream-of-consciousness and digression. These devices are to some degree also characteristics that are needed to define the Gonzo journalistic style. Bruce-Novoa says that Thompson’s “[t]houghts and descriptions flow together, moving rapidly from one subject to another, direction often determined by word association” (41). He further adds that Thompson’s associative digression especially forms a central characteristic of his Gonzo style. “The Kentucky Derby” demonstrates this very clearly. Thompson hurriedly passes through the happenings at the derby in, at times, a frenzied pace. The few days he spends in Louisville pass by in an episodic nature. Every situation in which Thompson finds himself, there is hardly any pause to contemplate what

was happening, had happened or resolves into happening regarding the situation before. This goes for both Thompson the protagonist as well as the reader.

Mosser appears to support the literary devices and characteristics mentioned up until now as typically Gonzo. He states that "Gonzo is also a narrative technique, a form of subjective, participatory literary journalism that places the narrator in the center of the narrative" and adds that "Gonzo also describes Thompson's style, employing a verb-driven, "running" syntax ... fragments, allusions, ellipses, abrupt transitions, and gaps" ("Gonzo" 88). Yet, most of these style characteristics, typical for a work of Gonzo Journalism, are not all that meets the eye. There are three more noteworthy literary devices that need mentioning.

Firstly, there is employment of fabrication. In the case of "The Kentucky Derby," a clear example of fabrication shows itself through Thompson's use of "reprinting" newspaper headlines. It seems unlikely that these headlines were actually published during Thompson's journalistic adventure at the derby event. It seems more likely that Thompson fabricated these. An interpretation for Thompson's choice of supposed fabricated headlines is to make the actual headlines more exciting to read, or maybe make them appeal to the reader's imagination more. This is especially likely if Thompson deliberately chose to write these headlines as if *he* were an actual newspaper editor. Eventually, little is said or written about it in academic works. Mosser, for example, does mention "fabrication," but does not elaborate any further on it. It remains to be said that the headlines in "The Kentucky Derby" have a realistic nature to them because the fabricated headlines used in the article are representative of the state of the US and its current events, as instances of literary

analysis in chapter 4 will show. Some appear hyperbolic while others seem to paint an accurate picture.

Secondly, there is the “deliberate derangement of the senses through drugs and alcohol” (ibid.) Assumingly, Thompson employs this to change his perception of reality and “to achieve a secular form of transcendence of the mental restrictions imposed by law and government” (Stephenson 5). This is not unlike the use of the “deconditioning tool” which the hippie subculture propagated to make a change in its and Thompson’s current mainstream culture.

Thirdly and lastly, there is the use of a sidekick. Richardson corroborates in this assessment when he says that in Thompson’s work “the presence of a companion would become another significant theme (54). The credit Thompson’s use of a companion as a theme in his works might be slightly overstating the importance of this trait. It is, however, part of Thompson’s style. And of all the Gonzo characteristics and style devices the last three listed will feature in the analysis of “The Kentucky Derby” in chapter four. The passages and fragments of analysis will also contain some discussion of the other Gonzo traits, but will mostly be there to support the analysis rather than highlighted and centralized in the instances of analysis.

In *Fear and Loathing* (1972) Thompson was accompanied by Chicano lawyer and political activist Oscar Zeta Acosta, who went by Dr. Gonzo in the article-turned-novel. In “The Kentucky Derby,” the role of sidekick was given to Ralph Steadman. His “grotesquely expressionistic caricatures” were used to evoke a twisted perspective (Mosser, “Gonzo” 88). Richardson further adds that “Steadman’s



drawings became the visual counterpart to Thompson's extravagant pose" (56). In "The Kentucky Derby," Steadman does feature in the companion and illustrator role. He draws and sketches caricatures of numerous people and faces. However, these visual renderings are not depicted in the story. They are merely mentioned and discussed between the two quixotic characters. What can be said about Steadman's contribution is that his drawings, as Richardson puts it, are a visual counterpart to Thompson's "relentless diatribe, the ranting, the sneering attitude that acts as a gossamer over a deep sense of foreboding about where America's political, economic, and cultural leaders are taking the country" (72).

Richardson's statement on Steadman's drawings paralleling Thompson's writing is very much at the core of this thesis. Every piece of information up until now has led up to the claim that Thompson's Gonzo styled journalism is a way of expressing his critical thoughts and feelings about Sixties-era USA's socio-cultural and political state and the course it was taking into the future. In their perspective, the counterculture and the New Journalism both seem to address the issue of a USA moving in the wrong direction, not unlike the idiosyncratic and alternative perspective of Thompson through his Gonzo Journalism.

## Chapter 4. A Case Study:

### **“The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved”**

“The Kentucky Derby” was supposedly the first work of Gonzo Journalism. Several studies account the naming of Thompson’s idiosyncratic type of journalism to Bill Cardoso, friend and contemporary journalist. Tamoney and Hirst, for, example, both in search for the meaning of the term Gonzo, discover that it was Cardoso who first called “The Kentucky Derby” a work of Gonzo. As a result “Thompson seemed stuck with a label that he didn’t create” (Mosser, “Gonzo” 87). In other words, “The Kentucky Derby,” the sports article, should show most, if not all, of the foundational style characteristics of Gonzo Journalism. What these characteristics are has already been discussed. This chapter will analyze passages and excerpts from certain scenes to demonstrate the presence of the foundational Gonzo characteristics. I will do this in order to show Thompson’s socio-cultural and political critique of, not only, the Kentucky Derby, the American south, but also the country as a whole.

“The Kentucky Derby,” covers a period of three days. Those three days, in turn, are divided up into a dozen scenes which all are attributed their respective paragraph sections in the article. Which makes this of a point of interest is that this scene-based structure appears to be of an episodic nature. The scenes follow each other chronologically, but there is not much else that actually connects them in terms of theme, topic or focus. Rather, every scene appears to be dedicated to a particular theme in the story. However, “it is the social dimensions of the event of the race that are the piece’s main focus” (Winston 156). Ultimately, what connects these episodic scenes and their own respective topics is the big picture, namely the social

dimensions of the events. Some of the more notable dimensions are the different types of derby visitors, the (class) division between the spectators, greed, and several forms of corruption. Because of this, the analysis will follow the article's episodic scenes construction. Most, if not all, scenes will be examined for Gonzo style-features and meaning of the text's content. As a result, the analysis will yield outcomes that are specific to each scene and/or episode but are also still relevant to the wider scope of "scathing cultural critique" (Freeman and Le Rossignol 4). The analysis should ultimately show that "The Kentucky Derby" piece was written in the specific Gonzo style to express Thompson's socio-cultural and political criticism of the US by taking the Kentucky derby as a microcosm of the nation. Again, some of the notable socio-cultural and political criticism revolves around corruption, classism, and different forms of inequality. Or as Bruce-Novoa quite poetically states: "Gonzo Journalism was born as Thompson's alternative to armed revolution, a literary Molotov cocktail" (40).

While it is one of Thompson's shorter Gonzo pieces, only 14 pages long, "The Kentucky Derby" shows an abundance of content. Thompson quite unsubtly mocks the stereotypical southern styled gentry and addresses his view of corruption of sports and the American Dream. Bruce-Novoa's reading of "The Kentucky Derby" comes down to it being "a metaphor for the country" (40). Thompson addresses the aforementioned social dimensions of the Kentucky Derby event, but also refers to the aforementioned socio-cultural and political happenings numerous times. Sometimes he does so in obvious relation to the derby, and yet at other times the relation is less directly implied. In any case, "Thompson was in control at least of the message he

wanted to convey in his written version of events" (Freeman and Le Rossignol 4). A close reading of "The Kentucky Derby" in the context of socio-cultural and political problems experienced during the 1960s, and through the filter of the Gonzo style, will demonstrate this control.

Like many of his other Gonzo works, this article starts with Thompson-as-narrator and protagonist ending a travel and starting the metaphorical journey. This three-day journey takes him from pre-event reporter to Kentucky derby participant up to article topic. Thompson recounts this journey in a chronological series of events. He presents his experiences of the days during the event through his eyes. He deals with administrative issues during the first day. He is not able to find his companion and hired sketch artist, Ralph Steadman. And to make matters worse he lacks the required press credentials. The next day, Thompson and Steadman meet at the derby press box, still lacking the required credentials; they discuss the local scene of social class division, segregation, and inequality between the local population and the derby visitors.

Saturday, derby day, is the day on which expectedly the bulk of the story happens. The venue is crowded with people. Soldiers armed with riot sticks are also present. Loud press at the scene and of course horses with their jockeys. Thompson and Steadman are looking around, observing, and finally watching the race. After that everything seem to "blur into madness" (22). The rest of that night too. And all of the "next day and night" (ibid.). The last thing of relevance is Thompson looking in the mirror and being confronted with his own face: "a model for that one special face we'd been looking for" (23).

Before the article reaches Thompson's anti-climactic realization of finding that face he was looking for, the "Kentucky Derby" starts with a scene in underwhelming mid-action. Thompson's flight has ended and the plane has landed. Thompson "got off the plane at midnight and no one spoke as [he] crossed the dark runway to the terminal" (11). The lack of a description of how his journey by plane has been and pointing at his "crossing the dark terminal," by foot assumingly, Thompson is already setting the scene for the whole article. The passage hints at a transition from plane to foot movement and signifies a change from faceless and eventless travel to a still undetermined journey.

Thompson's journey will last three days and takes place in an around the Kentucky Derby event. It all starts at the airport where Thompson just arrives and visits the airport lounge. Here Thompson has his first encounter with another Kentucky Derby visitor. This fellow visitor, who urges Thompson to call him Jimbo, comes across as a caricature. In stereotypical machismo behavior, Jimbo disapproves of Thompson's drink order of a Margarita with ice. He warns Thompson that "[Louisville] is no town to be giving people the impression you're some kind of faggot" (11). Jimbo here is quite obviously no fan of homosexuals, evident of his derogatory choice of word regarding this demographic. Apparently, according to Jimbo, a margarita is not something "real" men drink. There are more instances that feature Thompson's encounter with Jimbo. It recurs later in the article. All of this is probably to reveal how within the culture of the US south a traditional gender ideology prevails. Jimbo is quite the stereotypical southern male. His speech involves dropping parts of suffixes, e.g. drinkin' instead of drinking. He uses stereotypical

southern speech utterance, for example, “naw” representing the negation “no.”

Another southern US related utterance is “nekkid,” which is to represent the adjective “naked.” In short, Jimbo is a generalization of how southern white males stereotypically are and act. This is of course no more than Thompson’s personal and particular hyperbolic perspective of a cultural image. It has to be said that Thompson has known these “types” for a big part of his formative years, and as can be judged from “The Kentucky Derby,” also later in his life.

Quite soon, it is made clear that Jimbo is a white man. After Jimbo ridicules Thompson regarding his temporary employer and his assignment, Thompson decides to take some sort of revenge. He tells Jimbo of the fictitious plan of the Black Panthers to come and disturb the Kentucky Derby and that “[t]he cops and the national guard have been getting ready for six weeks” (12). All Jimbo then cares about is the Kentucky Derby and, after a brief outrage, asking quite mopishly: “[d]on’t they respect anything” (ibid.). It is not hard to imagine that Jimbo is not concerned with the Black Panthers’ cause because of his stereotypical southern white male sensibilities. Obviously, the “Jimbo” character is a grotesque representation of the southern white male Kentucky Derby visitor. What Thompson is demonstrating here is the type of person he, as well as the reader, can expect to encounter. Thompson describes this type of visitor from his own idiosyncratic perspective. To him Jimbo represents the traditional southern white machismo celebrating cultural tradition with no regard to the “Other.”

The Other is also represented by the opposing gender, the female, which will be shown below. It could be cautiously argued that, in the first scene, Thompson is

already referring to inequality in the US. The country as well as the south is still dominated by white Anglo-Saxon males and their specific cultural values. The following examples will reflect this argument in differing degrees.

The remainder of this episodic scene revolves around Thompson still on the move. He visits a newsstand, a car rental desk, and finally takes a “yellow cab towards town” (13) after completing his primary administrative tasks. Arriving at an airport newsstand, Thompson treats the reader to a glimpse of some of the socio-cultural and political current events during the Kentucky Derby days. At the newsstand Thompson scans a headline of the *Courier-Journal* he picked up. It says: Nixon sends G.I.s to Cambodia to Hit Reds’ ...’B-52s Raid, Then 2,000 G.I.s Advance 20 Miles’ ...’4,000 U.S. Troops Deployed Near Yale as Tension Grows Over Panther Protest.” (12). This presentation of headlines, taken from the largest local newspaper, shows not only the literary technique of implementing news headlines, but also shows how Thompson interweaves the local with the national. This is the first hint of the Kentucky Derby being a symbolic place filler for the country. By implementing the headlines, Thompson alludes to the nation at war and pointing out the futility of the overseas war effort by mentioning the B52’s raid and the disappointing result of only gaining twenty miles for the G.I.s. The gain hardly seems worth the assumingly costly effort of a B52 raid. At the same time Thompson suggestively shows how the nation is in a kind of civil war by referring to the watchfulness of the nation’s armed forces of the country’s own students and future. This way, the article already shows signs of the bigger picture.

Meanwhile, Thompson keeps scanning and at the bottom of the page there is a photo of the first woman jockey-to-be. The text accompanying the photo appears to be of a questionable nature. With a bit of imagination, the photo's accompanying text can come across as rather derogatory and sexual. Here Thompson again uses newspaper content to espouse some implicit criticism on the current state of the nation. This time it is in regard to equality. Women are still not partaking as jockeys in horse racing. When they do partake, or are about to, they are underhandedly mocked. Thompson shows how inequality, of gender this time, is still present in the US, especially in large southern local newspapers. Up until now the covert clues to Thompson's message(s) are still implicit and suggestive, seemingly neutral. The examples show some of Thompson's critique on society, and its conservative socio-cultural politics in both mainstream journalism and the national culture this journalism voices. Stylistically speaking, this is shown first through subjectivity. The Jimbo character is Thompson's description of the dialogue between them. He seems fictitious, as if taken from a generic B-movie about the south. Jimbo is probably meant to portray not only a stereotype, or a trope borrowed from the movies, but is also meant to convey a sense of the kind of general visitors that frequent the Kentucky Derby and similar events.

The above examples are obviously still introductory and Thompson becomes more explicit in his observational criticism as the article progresses. In the final moments of the first scene, for example, Thompson makes a brief reference to greed and corruption and again the notion of the Kentucky Derby as a microcosm of the US as a whole. When Jimbo brags and boasts about his spending habits during the



Kentucky Derby, Thompson sarcastically agrees that “women in this town that’ll do anything for money” (13; italics in original). Thompson then, as if caught in a movie jump cut, contemplates the following:

Why not? Money is a good thing to have in these twisted times. Even Richard Nixon is hungry for it. Only a few days before the Derby he said, “If I had any money I’d invest it in the stock market. And the market meanwhile, continued its grim slide.” (13)

This little passage is the first example of the stylistic feature of “digression” and of “abrupt transitions.” It shows how Thompson quite abruptly puts the story on hold, in this case a dialogue, to digress into informing the reader of his own thoughts and contemplations, his personal perspective of events. Through this stylistic feature he is able to implement the wider scope of the article, which is to depict the Kentucky Derby as symbolic of the US.

Shortly after, in the second scene, another specific Gonzo style feature appears, i.e. the “use of a companion.” This is a stylistic feature mostly implemented in Thompson’s more renowned pieces. Thompson’s foreshadowing to the reader of “Ralph Steadman, the English illustrator who was coming from London to do some Derby drawings,” is a warning of complications to come. Steadman does not physically show up in the narrative of the article until the next day. Until then, the reader follows Thompson trying to obtain the necessary press credentials. Being unsuccessful still, Thompson, with help of the motel desk clerk, is finally on the track of Steadman’s whereabouts. He decides to

[take] the expressway out to the track, driving very fast and jumping the monster car back and forth between lanes, driving with a beer in one hand and my mind so muddled that I almost crushed a Volkswagen full of nuns when I swerved to catch the right exit. (15)

The excerpt above says nothing specific about the bigger implications of the “The Kentucky Derby.” It does not overtly refer to anything that is happening in the US at the time. There is no obviously perceivable reference or even implicitly represented insinuation to any socio-cultural and/or political issues happening in the US. The passage, however, does encompass two notable foundational stylistic features of Gonzo. Firstly, there is the sentence itself. The sentence consists of several clauses. Moreover, all of these clauses have their own verb. Also, the sentence reads without pause. This “verb-driven syntax” is one of Thompson’s Gonzo style devices. It is also a sentence type that is aesthetically pleasing in the sense that it does what it describes. More objectively speaking, it is also a sentence that addresses Thompson’s custom to be intoxicated by drugs and/or alcohol while on the job. What this sentence eventually does is to make the reader aware of his constant intoxication, at least his leading up to a drunken state. He appears to be warning the reader that the text’s content is written by an author who is clearly “under the influence” and thus hardly objective. Thompson’s perspective is of course as influenced by his surroundings and his personal experience as his intoxicated state.

In fact, Thompson was already drinking at the airport lounge. However, that situation differs from the one in the passage just above. In this passage Thompson is acting on work-related motives. He is trying to find his illustrator and co-worker. It

does not seem to affect him yet in a way that would drastically change his perception of reality and “to achieve a secular form of transcendence of the mental restrictions imposed by law and government” (Stephenson 5). This happens later in the article when both Thompson as Steadman get drunk, ultimately leading to Thompson’s aforementioned realization in the last scene.

The first two scenes feature most, if not all of the foundational Gonzo stylistic features. Some of the minor stylistic features mentioned in chapter 3 do not appear in the article. Less foundational features, like sketches from articles, verbatim telephone calls, and telegrams do appear, however, in *Fear and Loathing*. The feature of inserted notes does make an appearance. In the third scene, on derby day, Thompson takes out his notes and has a look at them. The notes are succinct at first, but show Thompson’s tendency to digress through verb-driven syntax. However, Thompson appears to stop himself mid-sentence in the notes. These lines that represent the notes following show what is just described: “Rain all nite until dawn. No sleep. Christ, here we go, a nightmare of mud and madness ... But no. By noon the sun burns through -- perfect day, not even humid” (19). Thompson starts his notes with two facts written down in a pithy and brief telegraphic style almost. It has rained all night until dawn and he has not slept at all.

When Thompson wants to elaborate on the rain and its effects on the day, and his lack of sleep, and its effect on him, the subsequent note becomes more complex. Sub-clauses already have been inserted and Thompson seems to want to go on a long and plaintive rant. Instead, Thompson appears to cut the rant short, only because the rain stops and sun burns through. The notes clearly demonstrate how Thompson

keeps track of his experience of the events of the day. Thompson also appears to use his notes to record his own mood at specific times. What the notes mostly do is symbolically summarize what has happened to Thompson up until the Saturday morning, the day of the derby. The first two factual telegraphic, ungrammatical notes refer to Thompson's search for Steadman and press tickets. The administrative issues are comparable to a raining day and/or night. And they can keep a person awake. The risk of the event not happening, and the sheer worry of not finding this foreign illustrator in Louisville, a "weird place," are implicitly symbolized by those two terse clauses (15). The following note insertion is the cut-off sentence that goes into a long running complaint. But the rain stops and the sun comes through, saving the day. In terms of the symbolism of the passage, this means that the administrative issues are solved. Both the press tickets as well as Steadman are found, and the derby can begin.

For the rest of the analysis of "The Kentucky Derby," this chapter will focus mainly on Thompson's most apparent Gonzo styled socio-cultural and political critique. It is the one characteristic that runs through the article from start to finish, at least to some degree. Obviously, this analysis will be supported by pointing out the Gonzo stylistic devices and features that Thompson employs and the effects of the Gonzo style. In other words, passages of "The Kentucky Derby" will be selected according to Thompson's emphatically present socio-cultural and political critique and the accompanying stylistic features will be identified and their effects explained.

In a short scene Thompson describes his and Steadman's arrival at the derby venue. Big mobs of people and "rows of soldiers all carrying long white riot sticks"

(20) occupy the blocks around the track. Thompson and Steadman get in. And in the subsequent scenes Thompson observes and lets loose his socio-cultural and political criticism on the derby and all that it symbolizes from his perspective. In addition, Thompson also uses his Gonzo style to “illuminate some of the harsher realities and less innocuous ideologies of the world of sports” (Winston 131). After all, “The Kentucky Derby” is first and foremost an article about a sports event, i.e. a horse race.

Thompson, as said above, writes the article about the event with the purpose to espouse his views on US society and culture by using the Kentucky Derby as a place filling symbol for the USA. And once he and Steadman are inside awaiting the start of the race, Thompson recounts his current surroundings and the people that inhabit it. He imagines a conversation between two privileged visitors. The conversation goes as following:

Yale? Did you see today's paper? New Haven is under siege. Yale is swarming with Black Panthers...I tell you, Colonel, the world has gone mad, stone mad. Why, they tell me a goddamn woman jockey might ride in the Derby today.

(21)

In this made-up conversation, Thompson addresses three current and meaningful national issues. He implicitly refers to the rebellious students at Yale, in this case, and the Black Panthers' cause and actions. And immediately after, Thompson reminds the reader of the gender struggle mentioned earlier. This kind of fabrication, while thought up on the spot, is Thompson's way of describing the kinds of privileged people at the derby, in the American south, and in a larger sense of the kind of

privileged people across the US. The term “Colonel”<sup>1</sup> and the speaker expressing this is meant to refer to the type of American that is isolated from world affairs to such a degree that anything countercultural happening in their country is seen as an external threat, something global. The US is the world to these people. They fail to look at the world, actually, because the US is big enough and they would rather focus on their own southern culture and deal as little as possible with anything else. Thompson manages not only to show what is happening in the country at the time but also demonstrates how the average mainstream American would and could probably react to these socio-cultural and socio-political developments.

The scene becomes more specific as of then. Thompson’s perspective zooms in on the type of visitor that sits up above the track, the Paddock bar. There Steadman becomes enthusiastic about potential subjects to sketch. He sees corruption in the faces, madness, fear and greed. All this is observable in one of Thompson’s old friends. This old friend has “fat slanted eyes and a pimp’s smile, blue silk suit” and his friends look like “crooked bank tellers on a binge” (21). Thompson now starts to specify what the average well-to-do spectator looks like from his perspective. They are the face of corruption; greedy, fearful, and possessing of a distinctive appearance. This goes for most of those of his generation that seem to resemble mainstream culture. This critique of his generation is all expressed in no more than one long running sentence consisting of no less than seven clauses in only four lines. It is again the verb-driven running syntax that Thompson employs to make a critical point. It is

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<sup>1</sup> In Kentucky, this title is given to “individuals in recognition of noteworthy accomplishments and outstanding service to a community, state or nation,” commissioned by the Governor and Secretary of State. ([sos.ky.gov/admin/Executive/Pages/Kentucky-Colonels.aspx](http://sos.ky.gov/admin/Executive/Pages/Kentucky-Colonels.aspx)).

almost a rant without the anger behind the typical rant showing. Thompson brings it forth as being factual rather than his personal and subjective view on things; yet the syntax carries the subjective emotional tone.

A little while before the race starts Thompson and Steadman decide to “spend some time in the infield, that boiling sea of people across the track from the clubhouse” (21). To get there, they “had to pass through many gates, each one a step down in status, then through a tunnel under the track” and from there “[e]merging from the tunnel was such a culture shock that it took a while to adjust” (ibid). A few aspects from this excerpt are especially noteworthy. Firstly, Thompson calls the crowd people. None of the more privileged derby visitors are ever called people by Thompson. Clearly, Thompson identifies more with the so-called “average joe” of society. The people are far less financially well-to-do and Thompson associates himself with his fellows; he recognizes the humanity of the crowd as opposed to the monster-like creeps embodied by Thompson’s old friend and companions. By descending amongst the people he directly alters his perspective of events.

The second noteworthy utterance by Thompson is the part describing Thompson’s and Steadman’s way down to the track. The “many gates,” the steps down, and the tunnel all signify Thompson’s observation of social division at the event, as embodied in the very structure of the race track. In general, gates are used to keep people out, and sometimes to keep them in. It is not a far-fetched idea that the gates at the derby in Thompson’s eyes are used to keep the crowds out and the “creeps” in. Another way to interpret the gates is to see them as Thompson’s allusion to C. P. Cavafy’s poem “Waiting for the Barbarians” (1904; English trans. 1951). The

poem, in short, is a retelling of the impending demise of a civilization, much resembling the Roman Empire, where outsiders are told to be coming to make an end to the portrayed civilized state, according to Boletsi (155). In "The Kentucky Derby," the crowd at the track Thompson describes appears to allude to the crowd as a horde of barbarians in the poem. The crowd is likened to a violent and savage threat to the self-styled "civilized" gentry within the safety of the gates, at the clubhouse. In this little act of journeying Thompson is pointing out in the passage the physical and economic division of the social classes that exists at the cultural sports event that is the Kentucky Derby. By descending into the crowd, Thompson is signaling his allegiance.

Finally, when Thompson and Steadman return from their brief stay at the track, the race becomes the focal point of Thompson's reporting, or so it seems. In fact, Thompson does not report more about the race than the following:

The race itself was only two minutes long, and even from our super-status seats and using 12-power glasses, there was no way to see what was really happening. Later, watching a T.V. rerun in the press box, we saw what happened to our horses. Holy Land, Ralph's choice, stumbled and lost his jockey in the final turn. Mine, Silent Screen, had the lead coming into the stretch, but faded to fifth at the finish. The winner was a 16-1 shot named Dust Commander. (22)

In the text, the above excerpt is not even emphasized in regard to its textual context. The effect this passage has on the reader is that it comes across as merely matter-of-fact, as if it is only mentioned because the format of the text in which it appears



happens to be a sports article. The passage containing the race results is not even as matter-of-fact as it might seem. Overall, what Thompson is saying here is that the race itself is not of interest in the article. He does give the results of the race but does not elaborate any further than that. What Thompson adds to this minimal reportage of the race is how he and Steadman did in terms of betting: they both lost. That is it. As soon as Thompson has fulfilled his sports journalistic obligations, he picks up his socio-cultural critique and commentary again.

The race was over and the “crowd surged wildly for the exits” (ibid.). The venue empties in a chaotic way, with people misbehaving in different ways. Thompson and Steadman, “both half-crazy from too much whiskey, sun fatigue, lack of sleep, and general dissolution,” decide to hang around a bit and watch the “mass interview with the winning owner” (ibid.). In typical Gonzo style, Thompson recounts the interview and even incorporates direct quotes from those involved in the interview. By way of this stylistic device Thompson creates another way to voice his criticism. By not portraying the interview verbatim, nor in full, Thompson devises a way to insert his own narrating voice. This has the effect that Thompson the narrator is an objective spectator and listener of the interview. Another cause for this effect is Thompson’s lack of self-reference and the use of the third-person pronoun “he” while recounting the interview when it takes place. He becomes rather faceless, not unlike the group of journalists conducting the interview. The passage below will illustrate the atypical subtlety of Thompson’s tactic to convey the fabricated objectivity described above. It will also show how Thompson uses the interview to

highlight another socio-cultural issue. This issue will be discussed right after the following passage:

We hung around the press box long enough to watch a mass interview with the winning owner, a dapper little man named Lehmann who said he had just flown into Louisville that morning from Nepal, where he'd "bagged a record tiger." The sports writers murmured their admiration and a waiter filled Lehmann's glass with Chivas Regal. He had just won \$127,000 with a horse that cost him \$6,500 two years ago. His occupation, he said, was "retired contractor." And then he added, with a big grin, "I just retired." (22)

Now, the issue that Thompson the faceless narrator, as it were, implicitly addresses here is about how (equine) sports are currently viewed in Louisville specifically, but also in the US generally. After all, as was established earlier, the Kentucky Derby and Louisville is generally considered a microcosm for the whole of the USA.

Following the passage and Thompson-the narrator, the big issue here revolves around the importance of money in sports, another capitalist venture. In the case of the Kentucky Derby, Winston assesses that apparently the race "as Thompson evokes it here, is about money, rather than glory or loyalty or emotion" (Winston 157). It is not the horse or even the jockey that is put in the spotlights. The owner of the horse appears to be the big winner in this equine sports spectacle. He is a winner not only competitively speaking, but also regarding his winnings. To the owner, winning the race means an income and a way to secure his retirement. Interpreted this way, the Kentucky Derby is considered to be a business for financial security. The fact that the owner made a profit on, what one must assume was a calculated gamble, shows the

attitude of contenders and other interested parties regarding sports, a specifically horse racing.

After the interview, Thompson leaves it at that. The mode of the text switches back to Thompson the first-person narrator and protagonist. Things are becoming more subjective and personal again. His memories of the rest of the weekend are blurry at best. On Monday morning Thompson and Steadman meet for the last time. Steadman, utterly hungover but still drinking, is absolutely culture-shocked and wants to leave as soon as possible. Thompson at this point is nurturing his own hangover and cannot do much else but selfishly be preoccupied. And this is the moment where the notorious epiphanic climax of the article appears, right near the end. Thompson's swollen eyes "had finally opened enough for [him] to focus on the mirror across the room and [he] was stunned at the shock of recognition." A little confused at what Thompson sees in the mirror he thinks that it is maybe someone else. For a moment he thinks it might be someone that Ralph might have brought with him, "a model for that one special face we had been looking for," he says. Thompson continues saying:

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 had been looking for – and it was, of course, my own. Horrible, horrible ... (23)

According to Winston, that special face Thompson and Steadman were looking for illustrates "all the rotten elements of the Kentucky Derby's cultural context, particularly in terms of the deficiencies of the society in which it takes place" (158).

This affirms the argument made in the previous chapters of this thesis. Cultural context is the greater scope of observation and criticism in “The Kentucky Derby,” Thompson’s sports article as a subject of investigation. Not only that, it is also a co-determining factor of both the writer as well as the implied reader of Thompson’s sports article. Thompson-as-protagonist, like Jimbo, is an outsider visiting Louisville and the Kentucky Derby, or so it seems. Thompson was actually from that place and is not as alien to it as his persona in the article makes it seem. Then again, Jimbo, as an amalgamation of the stereotypical American southern male, is not that much of an outsider either, in the technical sense.

That Thompson’s face personifies the target of his socio-cultural critique, is not only confronting and shocking, it also signifies that this kind of face is found all over the country. What is more, just like Jimbo, Thompson too is from the American south, specifically Louisville, Kentucky, as it happens. It signifies that on a smaller scale the shocking and confronting face is prone to be found in this area. On a personal level, Thompson here is also suggesting that your place of cultural origin and upbringing will never leave you. Under the right circumstances your heritage will show its face on moments you least expect it. This is for Thompson the case, at least. The face Thompson sees in the mirror apparently is, as he so illustratively recounts:

the mask of the whisky gentry –a pretentious mix of booze, failed dreams and a terminal identity crisis; the inevitable result of too much inbreeding in a closed and ignorant culture. (17)

This is the sole passage that relates directly to the big moment when Thompson finally finds that special face he was looking for all that time he spent at the Kentucky derby venue. It is also a passage that is most specifically focused on the local people of Louisville, in the state of Kentucky, USA. It is quite surprising to find out that the majority of the article draws parallels between local US culture and the wider scope of national US culture, yet the article's biggest moment seems to abandon this approach of drawing the parallel. However, in the epiphanic mirror moment, Thompson appears to conclude his socio-cultural critique in the article as atypically as it might appear, with the focus turned on himself entirely. In addition, it needs to be said that Thompson's epiphany, and the writing accompanying it, cannot be seen apart from the description of that special face.

Broken down in bite-sized chunks, the climactic passage gives some ground to again interpret the moment of recognition as a parallel drawn between the specifically local and the general national. In other words, looking at the mirror passage in a critical way and analyzing the relevant lexical phrases, the argument can be made that even Thompson's quest-ending epiphany adheres to the article's overall aim to portray the Kentucky derby as a microcosm of Louisville, Kentucky, the American south, and even the country as a whole. The passage describes the specialness of the face. Thompson uses no less than three uninterrupted adjectival phrases for the description. Every phrase highlights another aspect of the face and thereby under the surface referring to certain issues and events happening in the US at the time. It might be taking quite a few liberties to interpret the phrase "pretentious mix of booze" as referring to the youthful counterculture and their

choice of intoxicating substances versus the older traditional mainstream culture and their respective substance habits. The view of the older generation to discriminate between alcohol and the youth's newer trending drug options is pretentious. Just because alcohol is legal does not make it any less of a drug. It is pretentious to condemn other drugs than alcohol while the arguable damaging effects of both kinds are as invasive.

The phrase "terminal identity crisis" signifies another notion present in the US. The phrase refers to the US as a failing melting pot of ethnic diversity. As of its founding the US was dominated by male WASPs. It is now in the precipice of a forceful evolution of recognition of a myriad of identities: African-Americans, Hispanic-Americans, independent women, free youths and countercultural cliques all striving and sometimes fighting for their place in a more inclusive US society. Equality for all is now actually in the process of being realized. It results into an identity crisis for those who were the norm and the example of the American: the male WASP. What makes it terminal is that the equality struggle coming from all sides, when successful, will be irreversible. Lastly, "the inevitable result of too much inbreeding in a closed and ignorant culture" represents the whiskey gentry before the countercultural Sixties, in a way. If diversity is being repressed, women undervalued, and the youth ignored, cultural development will stagnate. This is of course just one way of interpreting Thompson's evocative phrasing. It is, however, a reading based on contextual awareness and knowledge of the stylistic idiosyncrasy of Gonzo Journalism.

As a concluding remark it is useful to quote Winston's words in response to the mirror-recognition scene:

Thompson's face is, in a sense, the face of the victim/product of the grotesque nature of the social environment. This perceptible drink-ravagement and disease are, it is important to note, signs of damage before they are signs of culpability. (159)

Thompson acknowledges that he is a product of his immediate environment. He is damaged by it just as much as he is complicit to it. Your environment of course shapes you to the point that you are part of it. Thompson concludes that despite all of their criticism any person is just as complicit, including himself.

## Conclusion

This thesis has implied the fundamental statement that Gonzo Journalism foregrounds the fact that an individual's personal context influences and informs their perspective and understanding of events. A person's perspective is formed because and despite of their personal history, beliefs, knowledge, and environmental circumstances. Any interpretation of an event is partly dependent on the perspective and the personal context feeding it. Another factor influencing a person's interpretation of events, foregrounded by Gonzo Journalism, is the socio-cultural nature of the object of interpretation. This object does not stand apart from the world it is found in. It too has its own context. For example, the counterculture discussed in this thesis loses most, if not all, of its relevance if the circumstances that caused it to emerge and rise were not taken into account. The first chapters of this thesis concerned themselves primarily with the relevance and importance of realizing that interpretation is more than an objective, mechanical act of breaking down and dissecting a cultural object of study. Personal perspective and context inherently play a significant role, and are foregrounded in Thompson's Gonzo Journalism.

Chapter two provided a concrete example of relevant contextualization. It specifically concerned itself with historical context in terms of social and political contributing factors to a context. The chapter described the time and place in which "The Kentucky Derby" was written and published. Yet the chapter did not solely function to set the scene of "The Kentucky Derby," so to speak. It emphasized the contextual factors with which Thompson was himself actively and critically engaging with at the time of writing the article. Thompson's personal and the article's



historical contexts arguably influenced the representation of the topics Thompson decided to address in his article, be it overtly or covertly.

Chapter three contextualized Thompson and his article within the tradition of literary and New Journalism. Thompson's Gonzo style was shown to build on new journalistic techniques developed by writers like Tom Wolfe that foregrounded an aesthetic dimension to journalism, a focus on impressions and alternative perspectives, and providing the reader with an immersive experience through the rendering of dialogue, symbolic language and a scene-by-scene reconstruction of events. The chapter eventually focused on the specific stylistic and structural aspects of Gonzo Journalism that developed out of the New Journalism, as Thompson turned to hyper-subjectivity and the rendering of personal experience as symbolically resonant of broader cultural phenomena and expressive of social critique. These chapters provided the relevant critical context for the literary analysis of "The Kentucky Derby" provided in chapter 4.

The literary analysis in chapter four showed indeed that an understanding of perspective and personal and historical context are not just relevant but essential to an understanding of "The Kentucky Derby." The article is in and of itself highly contextually involved. As a journalistic text it is a witness of its exact time and place. It functions as a historical document in more ways than one. "The Kentucky Derby" speaks critically about American society, politics and current events during a remarkably volatile era in the nation's history. The article is also historically relevant as it is a concrete example of the radical changes taking place within the journalistic tradition. Moreover, it is a historical document as it is a piece of evidence for the birth

of Gonzo Journalism, a highly idiosyncratic and radical way of “news” coverage that has proven influential across and beyond the English-speaking world.

What Thompson’s Gonzo style of journalism foregrounded in the 1960s, and still today, is that interpretation of events and texts is as much dependent on the reader’s and the writer’s context, as it is on the actual substance of the text. The text alone, like statistics, cannot mean much if there is no context in which to place it. However, context is merely an empty space without the text to give it content. This co-dependency between text and context, that Thompson was so conscious of in all his writing, is also found between reader and writer. And it is also found between writer and text and text and reader. This co-dependency might be worth discussing and arguing in terms of literary interpretation. Is there actually a co-dependency of the aforementioned aspects of literary interpretation, or is this merely a presumption that can be undermined? Does literary analysis always involve so many aspects and steps to come to a valid interpretation of a text? What is considered to be a valid literary interpretation, both in the eyes of the public, as well as in academic opinion?

Generally speaking, every interpretation contains a degree of validity.

Thompson’s technique of hyper-subjectivity suggests that there are probably as many perspectives, opinions and perceived truths as there are (conscious) people on this planet. However, not every interpretation is as well substantiated as another. Thompson’s idiosyncratic and radical perspective in his equally idiosyncratic and radical Gonzo Journalism proves exactly this point. While, his modus operandi is highly subjective it is, however, also very well supported by facts and (extratextual) context.

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