Hunter S. Thompson

LEARNING FROM *FEAR & LOATHING IN LAS VEGAS*: NOSTALGIA AS THE FORGETFUL REIFICATION OF HISTORICAL FORM

By

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Abstract

This thesis marks the first critical full–length treatment of Gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson and examines how "history" constitutes a central problematic in his career–long fascination with America. In this context, "history" designates the fluid interchange between two modes of periodization: memory and nostalgia. Using a recently published collection of his personal correspondence, a close reading of his foray into political activism and considering *Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas* in light of his career, I treat Thompson as a critical theorist of American pop culture. As such, I compare his Gonzo aesthetic to the more rigorously developed cultural critique of Frankfurt School critical theorist Herbert Marcuse, whose impact on the New Left puts him in a position roughly contemporaneous to Thompson. Marcuse's concept of one–dimensional culture and embrace of negative critique provides a theoretical framework by which to understand how Thompson's trademarked phrase "Fear and Loathing" serves as a trope more closely affiliated to existential nausea than it is to its immediate referent, drug–addled paranoia. The above distinction between different "histories" belongs to Fredric Jameson, whose theorization of the postmodern reveals how history is constituted by both objective fact and subjective narrative. More precisely, I am applying this model to Thompson because of both his status as a pop cultural celebrity and also his own attempts at periodization as evinced by his fascination with the Sixties. Finally, I discuss Jean Baudrillard's contention that pop culture is constituted by simulation in relation to Thompson's frantic vision of American pop culture within *F&LLV*. Simulation here serves as a process homologous to the contest between memory and nostalgia in the construction of history.

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Memory or Nostalgia? The Politics of Pop Culture

If, as David Foster Wallace contends, "popular culture is the symbolic representation of what we already believe to be true,"[1] then how should we evaluate the function of an undeniably pop figure like Gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson in American pop culture? What are we to make of his venal, dark, confused and viciously funny weekend jaunt to Las Vegas? As a (nearly) thirty–year–old relic, how relevant is *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* to *our* pop culture, to the shared experience of the here and now? Certainly, its compression of drugs, rancid idealism and paranoid exhaustion encapsulates—and packages—for many the nostalgia of having lived through the late Sixties and early Seventies; eerily, a similar, alien glow is afforded to those of us too young (or pre–embryonic) to have firsthand memories of this era. Studying Thompson in the here and now, then, on one level teaches us about the pop culture of a past period, the anxieties, obsessions and desires of America, circa 1971. However, reading *F&LLV* and related works is a much more involved and complex effort than the simple gleaning of historical fact. By understanding the ways in which Thompson figures (and is figured by) pop culture in his work (which, as we shall see later, consists of much more than his written output), we have much to learn about how exactly (our) pop culture is a *symptom* of history, a certain kind of history. I say a certain kind of history here, because, for the purposes of organizational clarity, I shall argue that pop culture is very

[1] As quoted by Mark Kingwell ("Against Smoothness" Harper's. July 2000: 15– 18).

much the product of tension generated between two forms of historical narrative, a model provided by Frederic Jameson through his work in theorizing postmodernity. The first mode—upon which pop culture is predicated—is what I have described above as nostalgia.

> [T]his mesmerizing new aesthetic mode itself emerged as an elaborated symptom of the waning of our historicity, of our lived possibility of experiencing history in some active way. It cannot therefore be said to produce this strange occultation of the present by its own formal power, but rather merely to demonstrate, through these inner contradictions, the enormity of a situation in which we seem increasingly incapable of fashioning representations of our own current experience. (*Postmodernism* 21)

The second mode I shall describe simply as *history*; being the continued attempt to make sense of what the nostalgic mode would have us believe we are incapable of understanding. Jameson clearly privileges the study of *history* as a struggle against reductive thinking and wishful simplification of unavoidable complexities, a move which he characterizes as inherently political.[2] I find myself hard–pressed to disagree and will also challenge the nostalgic reification of history, focusing on Thompson as a site of pop culture contested over by competing historicities.

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[2] "If we do not achieve some general sense of a cultural dominant, then we fall back into a view of present history as sheer heterogeneity, random difference, a coexistence of a host of distinct forces whose effectivity is undecidable. At any rate, this has been the political spirit in which the following analysis was devised: to project some conception of a new systematic cultural norm and its reproduction in order to reflect more adequately on the most effective forms of any radical cultural politics today." (Jameson *Postmodernism* 6)

Gonzo Hermeneutics

My investigation of Thompson, then, will attempt to (re)establish him as having a hermeneutic function: "in the sense in which the work in its inert, objectal form [for example, the reified form of Thompson–as–star] is taken as a clue or a symptom for some vaster reality which replaces it as its ultimate truth" (Jameson *Postmodernism* 8). This function, or what Jameson describes as the "depth model" (as opposed to the proliferation of "surface" models, such as intertextuality) is under constant threat of erasure by the processes of nostalgia (*Postmodernism* 12). Because Thompson circulates in pop culture as a "star" he is subject to a process of simplification (better yet: reification) which seeks to efface history in favour of nostalgia. Jameson describes this as the commodification and transformation of stars *into their own image* (*Postmodernism* 11). This curious doubling–back suggests that, in some way, the image precedes the star. What does this question of precedence have to do with Thompson? It demands that we treat him as a text or simulation (the Baudrillardian distinction between the two being that the former is a copy and the latter is a copy without an original), perhaps an overused postmodern maneuver, but one which Thompson seems to anticipate and even encourage. Thompson, then, serves as a nodal point, where we can diagnose two symptoms of historicity, the first being his reification in pop culture as a nostalgic *thing*, and the second being the ways in which he (both intentionally and unwittingly) resists this process of reification. In the first interpretation, Thompson–as–nodal point suffers from a gradual constriction of meaning as his celebrity eventually becomes incapable to signify anything other than

celebrity. Resistance, though, defies this closure. This resistance, though, is not necessarily a conscious act for Thompson's. What makes him such an interesting study is his simultaneous canny awareness of and unwitting implication in his own nostalgic commodification. Add to that his embrace of the college lecture circuit and other lucrative venues which intensified the process of caricaturization, and Thompson's complicity in the "flattening" of his public image is undeniable. Paradoxically, this collaboration could never have come about without Thompson achieving some measure of celebrity through his innovation of Gonzo journalism, which is a lamentation for this trivialization of American pop culture, as much as it is its enactment. So, the contradictions between what Thompson says and what he does create a conflicted space where his readers must make their own determinations as to the possibilities (and efficacy) of resistance, both for Thompson specifically and also the "vaster reality" of which Gonzo is only one skirmish of many.

Nostalgia implies that there are many "realities," disavowing the reality of what Jameson might call the cultural dominant or objective situation. One of the ways in which we can examine the competing claims of different histories is through an aesthetic phenomenon characteristic of the modern period: the divergences between Low and High culture. To return to Wallace again (and to substitute "pop culture" for "television"):

> [Pop culture] is the epitome of Low Art in its desire to appeal to and enjoy the attention of unprecedented numbers of people. But it is not Low because it is vulgar or prurient or dumb. [Pop culture] is the way it is simply because people tend to be extremely similar in their vulgar and prurient and dumb interests and wildly different in their refined and aesthetic and noble interests. (37)

Does my claim that Thompson is a pop figure imply he is vulgar and prurient and dumb? Not exactly. I am much more interested in why we perceive that Thompson and Gonzo journalism and *F&LLV* are vulgar and prurient and dumb.

How does nostalgia work in predisposing us to ingest an easily swallowed, though undigestible, pop cultural nugget like "Hunter S. Thompson." These nuggets are not digestible because they are refined into smooth crystals, inorganic and presented to us with sculpted, reflective faces. We do not interact with them; we merely accept. These are not zones of questioning, of resistance, of ambiguity or dissent. Actually they are very much like historical facts, self–evident bits of trivia that come together as a narrative account of what we share, much in the same way that different contestants share the same game of Jeopardy. It is this process of creating a narrative—the competition of polymaths with quick trigger fingers—where pop culture happens, floating happily through the interstitial spaces, gleefully fetishizing nodal points rather than examining its own fluidity and dynamism in moving from point to point. Jameson's account of structuralism presents a homologous example by which we can understand the necessity of understanding pop culture as a process when it tends to regard itself as a product:

> Meaning [...] is generated by the movement from signifier to signifier. What we generally call the signified—the meaning or conceptual content of an utterance—is now rather to be seen as a meaning–effect, as that objective mirage of signification generated and projected by the relationship of signifiers among themselves. (*Postmodernism* 26)

Process, then, must be read into what appears on the surface to be a binary, or one–to–one relationship between sign and signifier. If it is not, the dynamism of history

(i.e. the process of signification) will become gradually ossified into static binary positions. As a result, the signification of historical trends is subsumed under the glossy patina of event–signs: Watergate leads directly to Monicagate. Pop culture then, involves the willed forgetting of history; it becomes the white noise out of which nodal points, or pop cultural objects, emerge like gradually distinct television broadcasts. Connecting the dots seems suddenly unimportant when—invariably, it seems, within Thompson's stories—one of those dots reveals itself to a tab of LSD or shot of Wild Turkey. Of course, it is reductive to equate pop culture nostalgia to drug ingestion, but Wallace sets the precedent above—and the ethic of instant gratification which characterizes consumer (and thus) popular culture imposes its own binaries in just such a reductive maneuver. If there was any shared incidence of Low Culture among the baby–boom demographic, then drug use was certainly it. But why does pop culture revert to simple binaries and how can we use them to read pop culture "against" itself? In the case of the former, pop culture (re)produces simple binaries because, as Wallace notes above, pop culture is overridingly concerned with the lowest common denominator: which, when vulgar and prurient and dumb, tends to avoid complexity.[3] By implying binary, or one to one, relationships, pop culture can reduce its constituent elements' signifying power: Watergate and Monicagate become linked because, at a superficial level, both are about bad presidents. By keying in on the "soundbite" potential, breadth and depth of signification is eschewed in favour of one–dimensional

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[3] Any statement involving "we" and "truth" inherently depends on some form of lowest common denominator, the base point from which people can communicate a sense of shared experience.

intensity: the headline becomes the story, we are barraged by the reiteration that Nixon and Clinton simply *are* bad presidents, not the more complex why they are or might be. These binaries, then, serve as an organizational tool. While their simplicity may obscure both the individual character of an event and the greater historical threads winding their way through it, they allow a subject in popular culture to assimilate and file away the proliferation of information they receive: a necessary evil in this Age of Information.

So, if binaries are reductive and capable only of framing Thompson *vis à vis* society in Manichean terms, then how should we go about explaining Thompson's popular appeal? I think the most valuable way is to trace the ways in which the signification manifests itself in the conflicted binary relationship between sign and signifier. In *The Conquest of Cool*, Thomas Frank works through a fundamental ambiguity not unfamiliar to Thompson, as he traces out the relationship between advertising and the counterculture during the Sixties. While on the surface, this collision between what is popularly imagined as hegemony and the resistance to it imposes just such a binary relationship, Frank reveals that this binary is founded upon not a constitutive antagonism, but instead a fundamental symbiosis:

> The countercultural style has become a permanent fixture on the American scene, impervious to the angriest assaults of cultural and political conservatives, because it so conveniently and efficiently transforms the myriad petty tyrannies of economic life—all the complaints about conformity, oppression, bureaucracy, meaninglessness, and the disappearance of individualism that became virtually a national obsession during the 1950s—into rationales for consuming [...]. This study is not concerned with the counterculture as a historical phenomenon as much as it is concerned with the genesis of counterculture as an enduring commercial myth, the titanic symbolic clash of hip and square that recurs throughout post–sixties culture. (31–32)

By placing Thompson at the epicentre of this debate, we can examine the ways in which he reproduces these binaries and yet resists them. In the insight and delusions of one figure, a cultural preoccupation is revealed: obsession with the nodal object masks a sub–conscious cultural working–through of the questions of *history*. Often, this concern is manifested through irony, a tortured, reflexive self–and–cultural–awareness of the nodal qualities of contemporary life. However, as Paul de Man has suggested, irony represents the endless spiral of signification inward and the eventual implosion of meaning: "Irony possesses an inherent tendency to gain momentum and not to stop until it has run its full course; from the small and apparently innocuous exposure of a small self–deception it soon reaches the dimensions of the absolute" (215). Because it is a closed circuit, irony never quite follows through on its inertia, which points toward the polysemous possibilities of *history* as opposed to the nostalgic ossification of meaning, but also succeeds in blunting its own progress. So while irony is certainly a rhetorical tool Thompson uses, and also a malaise he seems to manifest symptoms of, it is most valuable in its formulation of this constitutive ambiguity.

Over the course of this thesis, I will prove that Thompson's overriding concern is with *history*, both in his frantic search for its fugitive incarnations (the American Dream) and in his resistances and careful avoidances of it (drug consumption) and most importantly, in the ambiguous play between the two. While my approach to Thompson has been informed by the critical and literary efforts of a number of writers, I shall focus on the work of Jameson, Herbert Marcuse and Jean Baudrillard, all of whom, in one way or another, are engaged in theorizing the system of history. My

debt to Jameson is profound. His formulation of two sorts of periodization—the intellectually responsible search for the cultural dominant and the bad consciousness of pop culture nostalgia—is crucial to understanding the ambivalencies Thompson betrays in his words and deeds. Marcuse's description of advanced industrial society as one–dimensional outlines the conditions that keep Thompson in a constant state of internal conflict—the frustration of what Jameson calls a misery that does not know its name (*Postmodernism* 280). Baudrillard's theories of simulation allow for a more nuanced reading of Thompson's nostalgic reification. The ways in which he—as a star—reproduces his own commodification reveals a certain contingency of meaning when the status of the original is in doubt. As well, Baudrillard's fascination with America (and Las Vegas in particular) provides an interesting counterpoint to Thompson's own quest for the American Dream and fetishization of Las Vegas as the culmination of a certain nostalgic vision of America.

A few words on Thompson...

While Thompson's reputation as a cultural icon peaked during the Seventies, he was certainly no newcomer to the journalistic community. Starting with the Eglin Air Force Base *Command Courier* (from 1956–57) Thompson parlayed his stint as sports editor into a succession of entry–level positions with the *Jersey Shore Times*, *Time* and the *Middletown Daily Record*. He never managed to keep any of his positions, though, either getting fired for insubordination or fleeing just ahead of a sheaf of pink slips. In the case of the Air Force, he was granted an honourable discharge, ending a

relationship that had begun as the only alternative to jail time after some of Thompson's high school hell–raising caught up with him. Given his dismal employment record and difficulty in getting published, Thompson decided in 1962 to go to South America and worked as a freelancer there, sending the bulk of his work to the *National Observer*. In a letter sent to Phillip Graham, publisher of the *Washington Post*, Thompson explained his reasons for going to South America in the first place.

> I came to South America to find out what it meant, and I comfort myself in knowing that at least my failure has been on a grand scale. After a year of roaming around down here, the main thing I've learned is that I now understand the United States and why it will never be what it could have been, or at least tried to be. So I'm getting ready to come back and write what I've learned. (*The Proud Highway*, 372)

While Thompson would come back and write, it was the articles that he wrote while tramping through South America which laid the groundwork for the success to follow. Thompson wrote about politics, culture and attitudes towards the United States in Brazil, Peru, Paraguay, Uruguay, Bolivia, and Ecuador. After he returned to America, Thompson moved West, settling in Aspen, Colorado in the summer of 1963. Impressed with his work, Carey McWilliams, an editor at *The Nation* commissioned Thompson to write on a new breed of social outcasts: biker gangs. What would result cemented his reputation as a rising journalistic star.

The 1966 publication of *Hell's Angels* marked a break with traditional journalistic practice and also hinted at the Gonzo attitudes which would come to the fore several years later. The book was representative of a general shift in the practice of journalism, as writers like Norman Mailer, Joan Didion and Tom Wolfe eschewed objective viewpoints and formulaic writing in their quest to cover the story. Rather

than objectively monitoring the Hell's Angels, Thompson insinuated himself within the gang and rode with them for a year. He made it clear from the start he was reporting on them and thus never officially joined up, but he was an accepted outsider among outsiders. This status would reveal itself to be tenuous though, as Thompson's affiliation with the Angels ended abruptly after he was "stomped" over a discussion of the Angels' cut of his royalties. Despite the sobering postscript, the book was a great success, and Thompson's zeal for covering the story won him the admiration of Tom Wolfe, who awarded him the Brass Studs award in his anthology *The New Journalism*.

Having made a name for himself with *Hell's Angels*, Thompson was approached by a San Francisco magazine looking to broaden its horizons past the rock stars and popular music of the Sixties. By 1970, Thompson was writing for *Rolling Stone*, where he would soon become the National Affairs Editor. The first piece Thompson wrote for *Rolling Stone* is of especial interest because it details his involvement in the local politics of Aspen, Colorado (he lives just outside of Aspen in Woody Creek). It will be discussed in greater detail below, both because of the light it shines on Thompson's political convictions, and also because of the intersection between writer and subject, the confusion of protagonist and narrator which is perhaps the first principle of Gonzo journalism. Over the next two years, Thompson underwent his greatest period of creative and productive ferment. Aside from a number of articles published in *Rolling Stone*, *Scanlan's Monthly* and *Pageant*, Thompson wrote *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* in 1971 and the next year, followed the presidential candidates from the primaries to the election itself—an experience captured in *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*

(1973). The former made Thompson his literary reputation, the latter established him as a seasoned political correspondent who could capture the spirit of the times without the trappings of objective reportage. Though highly embellished, *F&LLV* presents what might be the definitive word on Thompson's larger project: a career–long obsession with the withering of the Sixties' supposed promise. Gonzo journalism (a term Thompson uses to describe *F&LLV* as well as his "regular" columns and articles) is very much a literature of failed expectations. Because Thompson envisions this novel as a continuation of his journalistic project, it is easy to confuse Raoul Duke—the erstwhile narrator of *F&LLV*—with Thompson himself. While the autobiographical element in this story is unmistakable, it also extends into Thompson's other written work. Thompson creates alternate personas as much as he creates characters: Raoul Duke has written several articles for *Rolling Stone* (listed in the masthead as Sports Editor). Duke is not Thompson's only alter ego. When he likes to recall his self–declared Southern hillbilly roots, Thompson invokes Semmes Luckett for hayseed pronouncements. Later on in his career—during an acrimonious divorce—he identified himself with Lono, a Hawaiian god notorious for accidentally killing his mortal wife and in his grief banishing himself from the Hawaiian islands (Whitmer 260). Thus, it is impossible to consider any one of Thompson's works in isolation from the others. Instead, each work must be read as a play of intensities, an individual working–through of a career–sized set of problems and questions.

The Seventies were a good decade to Thompson; the publication of *The Great Shark Hunt* in 1979 proved that his struggle to be recognized during the late Fifties and

early Sixties would eventually be rewarded. *TGSH* was the first anthology of his writing; four more volumes (collectively known as "the Gonzo Papers") would follow, the latest being *Better Than Sex: Confessions of a Political Junkie* (1994). However, since that intense period from 1970–'73, Thompson, so the complaint goes, has lost his edge. Aside from *The Curse of Lono* (1983), nearly two decades would pass before Thompson released a book–length project. In the meantime, the consensus among his biographers and other critics, was that Thompson became a prisoner of his fame and lost himself within his Gonzo image. The end result has been gradual irrelevance; Thompson is no longer in the thick of things and has lost track of the nation's pulse. Given that much of his income during the late Seventies and early Eighties was derived from public appearances and in general cashing in on his celebrity, it is easy to see how Thompson could have dulled his razor–sharp critical faculties. Recently, however, there has been a Thompson renaissance of sorts. In 1996, *Fear and Loathing and Las Vegas* was welcomed into the Modern Library on the occasion of the twenty–fifth anniversary of its publication. In 1997, the first of a projected three–volume series of Thompson's letters was released; *The Proud Highway: Saga of a Desperate Southern Gentleman 1955–1967* met with critical acclaim. The following year, *The Rum Diary*, a novel–in–the–making for several decades was finally completed and published. Also in 1998, a film version of *F&LLV* debuted, directed by Terry Gilliam and starring Johnny Depp. While box office proved to be lukewarm, the film was a critical success. In fall of 2000, the second volume of Thompson's letters is scheduled for release. So, the last few years have seen a level of activity in Thompson's publishing and general interest in

his work unmatched since the heyday of 1970–'73. On one hand, I believe this recent bout with critical acclaim and popular recognition is due to the several decades lying between Thompson's contemporary audience and his favoured era: the Sixties (whose fall–out reached well into the Seventies). While his works may have lost their visceral immediacy, they have proven themselves to stand as enduring testaments to fine writing as much as they display keen cultural insight. However, on the other hand I also see his recent success as an example of cultural nostalgia deployed as a way of defining, demarcating and essentializing the Sixties. A strange tautology is created whereby Thompson is derided/venerated as a creature of the Sixties, and in whose persona the Sixties somehow become immanent. Thompson then, becomes a form of shorthand for the Sixties; similarly, the phenomenon known as the Sixties becomes located in Thompson himself. Dave Hacker, one of Thompson's editors from the *Observer* years explains: "I think Hunter was really the best chronicler of the 1960s. Through the bizarreness and the exaggerations, the flesh and blood gets added to the bare bones of history" (Perry 92).

Hacker's statement presupposes an organic unity to the Sixties, an assumption which anticipates the ways in which cultural nostalgia reifies the Sixties by fusing them with Thompson. If the Sixties are embodied in their relation with Thompson, then they become a commodity (by buying Thompson's books, seeing the movie, etc.). In this process of reification, the past becomes consumable, substantive even for those who were not participants. The Sixties, then, also become a fixed part of our collective past, creating the illusion of stability in the here–and–now by projecting it back into

history. And perhaps most importantly, in their materialization, the Sixties become an enclosed space, relevant to us only as cultural artifacts or museum pieces. The illusion of autonomy that this creates implies that the Sixties have no immediacy to us other than in the convenience of invoking this fantasized past to justify and maintain a deluded present. The problem with nostalgia is that it kills history (or at least the Hegelian notion of Historical Spirit) while maintaining its semblance. The end result of nostalgia—and of the fallacious imposition of organic unities—is that the distance between sign and signifier closes. At what Jean Baudrillard terms "the vanishing point" the circuit of meaning closes (*America* 44).

Nostalgia, then, represents a dangerous cultural tendency: memory gets trapped in reductive patterns of thought and the simplification of complex phenomena becomes directly proportional to our certainty that we have gained knowledge by consuming indigestible (yet) bite–sized pieces of culture. The nodal points in which meaning is invested and accumulates vary in their intensity, both among each other, and also as a matter of duration within themselves. If we care to read Thompson as a nodal site, the intensity in which he is regarded as such varies depending on the vagaries of popular culture. So, over the course of this thesis, I will focus on his most intense period, working outward from what he characterizes as "this foul year of our Lord, 1971" (*F&LLV* 201).

... and his critics

So far, there are no book–length critical studies of Thompson and his work.

When he does receive scholarly attention, it is invariably in the form of queries concerning what Tom Wolfe designated as "the New Journalism."[4] Wolfe himself is very much the reason for this interest, including two articles from Thompson in his landmark anthology *The New Journalism* (1973). Among the academic works I examined in the course of writing this thesis, scholars like John Hellmann, John Hollowell and W. Ross Winterowd consider Thompson as a "New Journalist." However, this critical reception is mixed. Thompson's excess and cultivation of his own iconoclastic status does not sit well with some reviewers: Winterowd in particular describes Gonzo as "barely tolerable," the ill–advised result of following "the esthetic of new journalism to its illogical conclusion." (93) While Thompson's reportage certainly takes place against a backdrop of revolutionary changes in the way in which news was packaged and presented to the public, some scholars have opted for different critical venues then what was quickly becoming the standard critical account of Thompson's works. In his study of the role of biography in contemporary American non–fiction, James Stull examines the way in which Thompson projects and maintains (and challenges) a unified sense of "self." In Bruce Novoa's "Fear and Loathing on the Buffalo Trail" the central relationship in *F&LLV*—between Raoul Duke and his Samoan attorney Dr. Gonzo—is

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[4] The "New Journalism" can be summarized as a movement away from traditional reportage in its discounting of objective, authoritative viewpoints, embrace of personal subjectivity, rupture of the (fantasized) hermetic seal which once existed between the reporter and the story, and the use of fictional elements to depict factual events. Similarly, some scholars have adapted criticism of new journalism to the demands of literary analyses of post–modern fiction. As John Hellmann explains: "Like the postmodern fictionist, the postmodern journalist assumes the inevitability of fictions in the making of reality, and pursues reality through a search for fictions emerging from an inventive, fresh interaction of world and consciousness." (60)

counterposed against Thompson's real–life friendship with Chicano civil rights attorney Oscar Zeta Acosta. Thompson had invited Acosta to join him on a weekend jaunt to Las Vegas in order to talk about a piece he was writing on the murder of a Chicano newsman Ruben Salazar in Los Angeles—the weekend immortalized in *F&LLV*.[5] Acosta is an interesting figure in his own right: aside from his legal work, Acosta ran for Sheriff of East Los Angeles. Unnerved by Thompson's portrayal of him in *F&LLV*, Acosta wrote two autobiographical novels (*Autobiography of the Brown Buffalo* and *Revolt of the Cockroach People*) which provide a fascinating attempt to "take back" his image from Dr. Gonzo, in part because he felt it undermined his Chicano identity.[6]

Of the criticism in print today (mostly chapters in larger works examining New Journalism and the non–fiction novel), none take advantage of Thompson's letters, which reveal the method behind the madness of efforts like *F&LLV*. The best writing available on Thompson is his biographies—a fitting choice given that his celebrity is inseparable from his literature. The best of the lot is Peter O. Whitmer's *When the Going Gets Weird*. Whitmer provides a highly readable account of Thompson's life and times and makes some fascinating links not found elsewhere. For example, Thompson's critical study of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* culminated in a

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[5] The story on the murder of Salazar—"Strange Rumblings in Azatlan"—appeared in the April 29, 1971 issue of *Rolling Stone*.

[6] Perhaps unintentionally, Thompson reflects this ethnic tension in the bickering between Duke and Dr. Gonzo in *F&LLV*. While the two men share a common goal in their quest for the American Dream, Dr. Gonzo reminds Duke that an overarching metanarrative is not necessarily an inclusive one. "But let's forget that bullshit about the American Dream," he said. "The *important* thing is the Great Samoan Dream." (20)

detailed outline of the novel, tracing through plot structure, character development and writing style. Such attention to detail is admirable if not particularly notable, but Thompson put his outline to good use. During the extensive editing of *F&LLV*, Thompson consulted the outline for guidance, imposing much of Fitzgerald's framework into his own efforts.[7] Of the other biographies, William McKeen's *Hunter S. Thompson* is out of print, and Paul Perry's *Fear and Loathing: The Strange and Terrible Saga of Hunter S. Thompson* is less substantial, depending preponderantly on Thompson's Gonzo papers (the four published anthologies of his journalism) for his information. E. Jean Carroll's *Hunter* is the most innovative of the biographies, using Gonzo techniques to tell the tale of an erstwhile biographer pressed into sex slavery by the brutish Dr. Thompson. Its thorough annotated bibliography and extensive integration of Thompson's material into her own account make *Hunter* a veritable fount of information; however, her Gonzo techniques wear pretty thin over a few hundred pages. As Thompson told one of his first interviewers, who embellished his written account of a dinner they shared because Thompson did not act in any visibly outrageous way: "nice piece, Lukas, but amateurs should beware of Gonzo" (Whitmer 205).

Whether biographers or scholars, Thompson's critics seldom use the opportunity afforded by the glitter of Thompson's celebrity to turn its luminosity back on the culture which granted it in the first place. By doing so here, hopefully I can draw

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[7] Whitmer points to perhaps the most basic form of homage: "discounting blank pages and Ralph Steadman's lurid caricatures, both books are 182 pages long." (179)

out the tensions between nostalgia and history—the ways in which the former constructs, obscures and imagines the latter—not only as it appears in Hunter S. Thompson's cultural efforts, but also in the way that popular culture regards these very same achievements. One of the most striking personal descriptions I ran across in my study of Thompson came from editor Alan Rinzler, who served as Thompson's conceptual midwife during his most productive years: "Maybe what puzzles me the most is why he has no insight into himself, and doesn't look at himself very deeply" (Whitmer 297). Thompson's career provides a reflective surface with which we can confront the images of culture that it believes itself to be, or, to return to David Foster Wallace, examine just what is involved when: "popular culture is the symbolic representation of what we already believe to be true."

Chapter One: Dreaming the Sixties

In the pivotal scene in Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, the narrator Raoul Duke slouches with his sidekick Dr. Gonzo, a 300–pound Samoan attorney at a bar in the Las Vegas casino Circus Circus.

> "We come out here to find the American Dream, and now that we're right in the vortex you want to quit." I grabbed his bicep and squeezed. "You must *realize*," I said, "that we've found the main nerve."
> "I know," he said. "That's what gives me the Fear." (48)

If one chooses to read this text as a quest narrative (as many of its critics have), then the quest seems to end right here, in the first third of the novel with our questers despondent at having achieved their goal. However, Dr. Gonzo's paranoia marks the peak of a reactionary episode of Fear and a decisive shift into a more aggressive sequence of Loathing, a desire not just to find the American Dream, but to confront it, to impose upon it some sort of moral reckoning for its debauched status.

By framing the American Dream as something that has been lost or perverted and imbuing it with a dual structure of attraction and aversion, Thompson engages in the same processes of romanticization and idealization at work in the imagining of an organic, unified past by which pop culture validates itself. As such, Thompson is guilty of the same sort of generalizations which pop culture would later use in rendering him a one–dimensional figure. However, this sort of romanticization is a process fraught with its own unique perils, chief among them that the object romanticized resists its

nostalgic reification and spirals away from attempts to contain, constrict and circumscribe its significance: the circuit of meaning will not willingly close. So, Thompson works himself into a double bind. On the one hand, his quest for the American Dream reflects the typical way of periodizing the Sixties in pop culture. However, this approach suffers from a flawed critical methodology. To equate the promise of the Sixties with some ethereal dimension of the American Dream is to reproduce the romanticized account of originary organic unity. A fantasized account of history which was never present is created. Pop culture, then, emphasizes its status as an eternal present by citing a history which legitimates it as such, but never challenges pop culture with alternative possibilities for the present and thus can never be realized within pop culture. In other words, the fundamental disjunction between nostalgia and history reflects a psychotic break within pop culture itself: though a product of a shared objective situation, pop culture grasps at the phantasm of homogenous subjective experience (i.e. there was a distinctly *essential* character to youth culture in the Sixties) *in order to legitimize itself.*[1] And on the other hand, Thompson's (always–already) failed quest for the American Dream—the trope he constantly returns to describe

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[1] This legitimization reflects a complex set of negotiations between past and future, yet which are always conducted in the present. Popular culture depends on a form of Orwellian double think; by hallucinating a certain past it creates a demand for a similarly idealized future. Paradoxically, this maneuver occurs within the eternal present; since popular culture owes its hegemony to the near–universal dispersion of consumer culture (in the West), needs and desires are always–already formulated with the demands of immediate gratification in mind. The end result is the commodification of memory, and its immersion into a capitalist system of equivalencies. Popular culture, then, constructs itself upon an ever–growing series of contingencies, taking itself further away from any sort of absolute the more it tries to validate its absolute status by appealing to the fiction of essentialism.

how the system of history resists its own revelation—recognizes the futility of such grand gestures. He patrols the boundary between these two modalities of periodization, employing Gonzo tactics in order to point to the implausibility of pop culture's legitimization of itself, while simultaneously holding himself forward as an exaggerated or hyperreal example of nostalgic reification. Thompson's awareness of this fundamental paradox and his attempts to depict it is best captured by the method of his critique: the easily reproduced, popularly digested visceral rant. While the tenor of his critique wrestles with substantive issues, the vehicle promotes its own caricaturization, locking Thompson into a degenerative cycle over the course of his career where the form of his critique increasingly constricted and suffocated its content.[2]

Frederic Jameson and the Vagaries of Periodization

Before I follow through the "psychotic break" alluded to above, the contested space between the two competing strains of periodization (either nostalgic or *historical*) must be examined. Frederic Jameson reminds us that there is no way to speak of the Sixties without initiating a process of periodization. However, the fugitive

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2 That Thompson fell prey to the same sort of vulgar stereotyping which served him well as a key Gonzo stylistic device suggests that life perhaps imitates art. Consider his bizarre, acid–fuelled exaggeration in describing a couple's embrace—an affectionate act tinged with ominous overtones when seen through his perspective of "bad craziness"at the Mint Hotel: "Terrible things were happening all around us. Right next to me a huge reptile was gnawing on a woman's neck, the carpet was a blood–soaked sponge—impossible to walk on, no footing at all. 'Order some golf shoes,' I whispered. 'Otherwise, we'll never get out of this place alive'" (*F&LLV* 24).

status of the American Dream that popular culture associates with the Sixties points to the ways idealized, totalizing, organic accounts of history resist their own definitive periodization. Why is this? In his essay "Periodizing the Sixties" Jameson explains:

> [T]o those who think that cultural periodization implies some massive kinship and homogeneity or identity within a given period, it may be quickly replied that it is surely only against a certain conception of what is historically dominant or hegemonic that the full value of the exceptional—what Raymond Williams calls the "residual" or "emergent"—can be assessed. Here, in any case [at least in the way in which Jameson reads Williams on history], the "period" in question is understood not as some omnipresent and uniform shared style or way of thinking and acting, but rather as the sharing of an objective situation, to which a whole range of varied responses and creative innovations is then possible, but always within the situation's structural limits. (178–179)

If we follow Jameson's advice, then, we will take the only quantifiably shared experience as occurring within the structural limits of the Sixties as an *objective* situation (which may not conclude with the decade). Jameson (wisely, I think) takes the essentializing notion of a Sixties' subjectivity—a temporally–defined, idealized fusion of national and individual character unique to the period—out of the equation. The actual existence of any such essentiality is impossible to prove (as once the Sixties "end" so does their unique expression of subjectivity), and given that it is usually remembered (nostalgically) as both part of a recent past we have somehow broken with, and is also projected upon a hoped–for future, its nostalgic character seems obvious. As noted above, Thompson himself takes the ambiguous stance of reproducing the idealized memories of a unified past, but never quite convinces himself of their validity. Indeed, *F&LLV* is a vivid example of history corrupted through its nostalgic reification.

> I have called it, only half sarcastically, "a vile epitaph for the Drug Culture of the Sixties," and I think it is. This whole twisted saga is a sort of Atavistic Endeavor, a dream–trip into the past—however recent—that was only half successful. I

> think we both understood, all along, that we were running a hell of risk by laying a sixties trip on Las Vegas in 1971 . . . And that neither one of us would ever pass this way again. (*Shark* 109)

By "laying a sixties trip on Las Vegas in 1971" Thompson presents himself as an agent of the Sixties. Why does he choose to live in the past? How is this risky behaviour? More importantly, when only a handful of years separates the periods in question, why is Thompson operating under the assumption of total rupture? In order to begin to answer these questions, we must attempt to bridge the two solitudes implied here: the imagined past of the Sixties and the "present" inherent in this work.

The key here, then, is the objective situation and structural limits that Jameson identifies. There are two methods of periodization at work in how we characterize the Sixties, and while we can look back to the Sixties as a time of protest and coalition politics, it is too easy to fall prey to the easy sentiment one can read into Thompson's reminiscing: that there was a distinctly essential character to Sixties' dissent.[3] In other words, Jameson warns against attributing anything other than the shared objective circumstances to the mass movements of the Sixties. What the people shared was not an innate/intrinsic sense of justice, but the experience of living in a time marked by vast and totalizing conflicts (Vietnam, Civil Rights, the Cold War, the growing

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[3] This is the most commonly occurring fallacy in Thompson's quest for meaning, for context, for mission—a quest that resonates as symptomatic of the an era distinguished both by its causes (civil rights, protest against the war in Vietnam, post–JFK politicization, etc) and by the coalitions formed to work towards these causes (SNCC, CORE, SDS, etc). To speak of the Sixties as marked by cultural crusades and individual quests is to blatantly romanticize them, an approach however, that is at least aware that the Sixties saw the last great flowering of Romanticism in the American popular imagination.

commercialization and production of an already nascent youth culture, etc.) into whose maw the average individual could not help but to be sucked in. When the structural limits of this objective situation expanded and contracted, the configuration which directly affected so many people was lost, spelling the end of this era of mass movements. Provisional victories in race relations and civil rights, along with the end of the draft and troop pull–out from Vietnam combined with an increasing view of the Drug Culture as populated by criminals rather than rebels, ensured that the objective conditions which once promoted unity had shifted and in doing so spelt decline. Without the universalizing framework of these overarching struggles, the era of coalition politics was replaced by that of the microgroup and a renewed emphasis on personal subjectivity, through—as Jameson puts it—the creation of a "whole new political space, a space which will come to be articulated by the slogan 'the personal is political'" ("Periodizing" 189).[4]

What remains to be seen is the nature of this objective situation as expressed by Thompson himself. The definitive moment in domestic American politics that Jameson identifies as constitutive of the Sixties (as opposed to the shift in emphasis in

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[4] Jameson best describes this process of atomization and the creation of microgroups as the new lowest common denominator that can still be effective in the arena of mass politics.

> [A newly constituted group] needs outside enemies to survive as a group, to produce and perpetuate a sense of collective cohesion and identity. Ultimately, in the absence of the clear–cut Manichean situation of the older imperialist period, this hard–won collective self–definition of a first moment of resistance will break up into the smaller and more comfortable unities of face–to–face microgroups (of which the official political sects are only one example). ("Periodizing" 190)

developing countries from their colonial past to their Third World future) is the assassination of President Kennedy. November 23, 1963 is a date that will live on as a day of infamy as surely as December 6, 1941. Jameson offers two views on the importance of the mysterious slaying: the first a romanticized reading of the Kennedy assassination as a lapsarian moment, an end to American innocence; the second is a more pragmatic assessment which locates in Kennedy's political rhetoric the first widespread political identification (and mobilization) of a distinctive youth culture.

> [T]he assassination of President Kennedy played a significant role in delegitimizing the state itself and in discrediting the parliamentary process, seeming to mark the decisive end of the well–known passing of the torch to a younger generation of leadership, as well as the dramatic defeat of some new spirit of public or civic idealism.... More significant, the legacy of the Kennedy regime to the development of a sixties politics may well have been the rhetoric of youth and of the "generation gap" which he exploited, but which outlived him and dialectically offered itself as an expressive form through which the political discontent of American students and young people could articulate itself. ("Periodizing" 183)

This sense of the "generation gap" is crucial to any attempt to periodize the Sixties. It holds dual significance in that it both recognizes a specific objective situation (the youth demographic) and also projects a nostalgic desire for this objective phenomena to have a similarly discernable subjective element. In other words, periodization has to discern between the objectively verifiable historical situation and the (nostalgic) temptation to interpret this shared experience as indicative of a essentialized subjective identity.

Thompson went through a prolonged period of grief and wild rage at the Kennedy assassination (indeed, one could make the argument that his work reflects a career–long attempt to work through this trauma), at one point writing that it was "the death of reason" (*Proud* 418). Such sentiments were by no means unusual among the

youth culture of the Sixties and indeed paved the way for the Marcusean "Great Refusal" which followed; or to put it in more popular terms, Timothy Leary's mantra: "Turn on.Tune in. Drop out." In a letter to his friend Paul Semonin, Thompson articulates his total despondency in the face of contemporary politics: "I have come to the point where I no longer see the difference between functioning Fascism and functioning Capitalism, or for that matter, functioning Communism" (*Proud* 443). However, while his agreement with his friend's dire assessment of the failure of the American system, he does point to a possible out:

> Your whole theory has only one flaw—you seem to have lost faith in the maverick, the man who can be convinced and thereby throw the switch on those both above and below him. He is a creation of this culture, the wise peasant, a man with a salary and enough leisure to ponder the alternatives, an enemy or an ally depending on what reaches him. But an essentially decent person. They beat the hell out of Nixon here in California two years ago, and they are about to stomp Goldwater. The only thing they lack is something to vote for, instead of against. But Kennedy was killed, so now we sit in a limbo where the decent man has a variety of things to vote against, but nothing to vote for. As for me, I see no hope of taking any position in the coming campaign. (*Proud* 443)

Here, the exogenous importance of the objective situation reveals itself to be at the heart of Thompson's disaffection. While this individual reaction to historical events is a fairly common one, it is still an endogenous reaction; the formulation of a shared subjectivity which the romanticization of the Sixties take as a given. However, while it might be a shared reaction, it is unquantifiable in the same way as the fact of Kennedy's assassination. While the reaction itself may be uniform, the quality of each individual reaction cannot be homogenous.

While one of the defining impressions left by the Sixties is the rise of personal

subjectivity within politics (collapse of the aggregate of coalition politics and fragmentation into interest politics), economics (the increasing emphasis on the consumer) and culture in general, this legacy perhaps hints at what was "lost" rather than what was "won." This obsession with the individual subject reveals certain tensions that plague its presumed status as the fundamental component of pop culture. Why does pop culture so fervently trumpet the progressiveness of a culture of individuals (self–actualized, of course), when the same surge of personal subjectivity—the untransmittable (and thus unverifiable) endogenous experience—foreclosed (at least in the sense of the grand political coalition) the possibility that popular culture could realize its idealized (or fetishized) image of itself? Does pop culture celebrate its own dissolution? This is not to suggest that there ever was an organic consistency to subjectivity similar to the coherency of individual subjects existing within certain objective structural limits. Paradoxically though, there seems to be a proportional relationship between the insistence of its essentialized, romanticized character and positively–perceived developments which foreclose the very possibility of this unity.

To this discussion of the conflicted point where the individual and culture seek to extricate the one from the other, Thompson introduces the maverick. This individual subject is the product of complex negotiations occurring at the fraught site mentioned above. To wit, the maverick is a character whose own romanticized status reflects, reproduces and buttresses the nostalgic mode in which popular culture presents itself. The shared process of romanticization reveals that the mythic mode in

which the maverick is portrayed—the ways in which he surpasses the individual—bring him towards pop culture and binds him to it, rather than projecting him away from it. Clearly, the ways in which Thompson deploys romanticization need to be examined—in conjunction with the way in which Thompson exhibits symptoms of romanticization: an overwhelming cultural malaise, plague of nostalgic fantasies.

For example, consider the by–now clichéd depiction of hippies as social drop–outs who eschew the materialism and alienation of modern civilization for a return to nature and communal living. This return to the soil and veneration of an idealized past are key gestures in the romanticization of the hippies. Romanticization is crucial to both the hippies themselves—who create a cultural void for themselves they must fill (and improve on) through the creation of an idealized social construct—and to the spurned party: popular culture. Pop culture romanticizes the hippies as a series of negotiations: it must explain to itself how and why there can be anything outside of itself and as corollary to this needed explanation, it attempts to reintegrate these dissidents by co–opting the language the hippies use to describe themselves.[5] In Thompson's self–identification as a member of the Love Generation, romanticization becomes ironically self–reflexive: he accepts the counterculture's argument that

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[5] The intentionality that I ascribe to pop culture above is a lamentable necessity for the moment. In the next two chapters, I will delve into the ways in which the "agency" of pop culture derives from the way in which it is presented (presents itself?) as autonomous from human agency. This strange illusion of independence (strange indeed: it is impossible to tell who is being deceived and who is doing the deceiving) is a phenomena touched on by a number of different theorists: Lyotard in his formulation of motricity, Baudrillard's concept of hysteresis and, as we shall see in the following chapter, Marcuse's description of technological rationality.

culture itself is flawed, but is equally suspicious of the counterculture's ability to work substantive change. In a letter to Paul Semonin excerpted above, Thompson says of the protestors at one of Berkeley's famous sit–ins: "...if I thought they were as serious as they are noisy, I might even pitch in."

However, one way in which Thompson adheres to the romanticized image of the hippy as itinerant wanderer, a migratory seeker, is in his embrace of the modes of the countercultural radical: political dissent and cultural criticism of the early Sixties choked by the stranglehold of the "Establishment," leading to the sensuous excess and abandon of the Drug culture of the mid– to late– Sixties and disillusionment and flight from society which characterized the early Seventies. This lifepath was acted out by Thompson on a fairly public scale (his retreat from society is chronicled through a conscious engagement with it: through his journalism), but instead of joining a rural commune, he repaired to what he refers to (sometimes jokingly; sometimes not) as his "armed compound," Owl Farm in Woody Creek, Colorado. Within F&LLV itself, this pattern of tense forays and hasty retreats is repeated by Duke's paranoid decision to flee Las Vegas in the wake of a massive hotel bill and masochistic return to cover the District Attorney's Conference on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs, to "infiltrate the infiltrators" (81). Citing R.W.B. Lewis' influential *The American Adam*, John Hellman argues that *F&LLV* acts a "parody of escape and return... [The pattern] basic to classic American romances" (83). Critic James Stull puts another spin on the facts, emphasizing the ritualistic nature of Thompson's pattern of covering a story by charting his psychic disintegration in reaction to the events chronicled and then beating a hasty

retreat back to Owl Farm to (as he puts it in *F&LLV*) "*maintain*" before he emerges once more for the next assignment is symbolic of deaths and renewals, or constant refashioning and reinvention of the self (95).

Another important manifestation of romantic leanings in Thompson's work is his fascination with the sublime, a sense of paralyzed apprehension when faced with the chaos underlying the humanly–imposed order of things.

> Whether inhabiting the physical space of his Woody Creek home or the psychic space of LSD, Thompson thrives in this marginal area that exists between civilization and anarchy. Thompson, as a romantic, feels most alive when he takes his body to the "Edge," as he calls it, through taking drugs or driving big, fast, powerful motorcycles. (Stull 94)

The Edge is the intensely personal experience of the outermost limits of stability and control. For Thompson, the sublime exists in a specific context, one confronts it as the *ungrund* seething below the cultural apparatus which both obscures and reveals it. Thompson characterizes the apparatus he engages with as the American Dream, and his Fear and Loathing comes from his conviction that the Dream is tainted, lost or murdered: in any or all events this avenue to the sublime and bastion which protects from its full force is irreparably damaged. The American Dream in this case signifies the possibilities of a collective engagement with the sublime; or in other words, it allows for the possibility of *meaningful* social organization, based upon something other than the provisionality and abstraction of concepts like profit, self–interest and greed. It is the dream of something larger than oneself which, when scrutinized, holds together as being *for* everyone, rather than an artificial framework imposed by one set of interests who subtly manipulate the social whole according to their own motivations.

However, with Thompson's bitter contention that the Dream has failed, the possibilities for the sublime are restricted to the individual sphere.[6] In the wake of this disintegration of the social whole (whether real or fantasized), Thompson embraces the individual pursuit for meaning, a quest which takes place between the poles of annihilation and creation. The perceived failure of the coalitions of 'sixties to enact real change and divert the course of history imply that confronting the sublime comes about only from a firmly established identity, either as an individual or as a member in a tightly–knit and homogenous "microgroup."[7] The end result is the fragmentation of American society:

> You could strike sparks anywhere. There was a fantastic universal sense that whatever we were doing was right, that we were winning . . . . And that, I think, was the handle—that sense of inevitable victory over the forces of Old and Evil. Not in any mean or military sense; we didn't need that. Our energy would simply prevail. There was no point in fighting—on our side or theirs. We had all the momentum; we were riding the crest of a high and beautiful wave . . . . So now, less than five years later, you can go up on a steep hill in Las Vegas and look West, and with the right kind of eyes you can almost see the high–water mark—that place where the wave finally broke and rolled back.[8] (*F&LLV* 68)

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[6] "My attorney has never been able to accept the notion—often espoused by reformed drug abusers and especially popular among those on probation—that you can get a lot higher without drugs than with them, And neither have I, for that matter." (*F&LLV* 63)

[7] Hence the tendency of contemporary politicians to orient their promises towards the last "universal" microgroup: the family.

[8] While initially Thompson and Michel Foucault would seem to have little in common, Foucault's concept of genealogy provides a homologous model by which to understand the constructedness of Thompson's historical account. Foucault reveals that the humanistic absolute of "man" is as much the product of nostalgia as the way Thompson figures the Sixties in his own work. The image of the surf that Thompson invokes here recalls the conclusion of Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things*:

Against Periodization: The American Dream and the Vagaries of Nostalgia

The story of how the American Dream turned into a nightmare (Watergate being one of the nightmarish manifestations) is very much a metanarrative of the Sixties. For Thompson, the American Dream is a useful and all–encompassing trope which suggests some of the ways in which the Sixties have come to dominate American self–definition. Within contemporary America, the Sixties have attained a cultural significance far beyond their seemingly chronological function. Indeed, they are among the most heavily romanticized periods within the American imagination, invested with near–mythical status:

> The story of the counterculture—and of the insurgent youth culture generally—now resides somewhere near the center of our national self–understanding, both as the focus of endless new generations of collective youth–liberation fantasies and as the sort of cultural treason imagined by various reactionaries. (Frank 32)

Here Thomas Frank demonstrates the propensity of pop culture to think of the Sixties

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> [M]an is neither the oldest nor the most constant problem that has been posed for human knowledge.... In fact, among all the mutations that have affected the knowledge of things and their order, the knowledge of identities, differences, characters, equivalences, words—in short, in the midst of all the episodes of that profound history of the *Same*—only one, that which began a century and a half ago and is now perhaps drawing to a close, has made it possible for the figure of man to appear.... It was the effect of a change in the fundamental arrangement of knowledge. As the archaeology of our thought easily shows, man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end.
>
> If those arrangements [of knowledge] were to disappear as they appeared, if some event of which we can at the moment do no more than sense the possibility—without knowing either what its form will be or what it promises—were to cause them to crumble, as the ground of Classical thought did, at the end of the eighteenth century, then one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea. (386–387)

in terms of simple binary relationships, which can account for a paradoxically deeply felt and yet flatly generic phenomena known as the national identity, the American subject. By working through the more complex negotiations of these two positions, Frank suggests that pop culture's nostalgic account of the past is not simply the product of tensions between two positions. Instead, any presumption of this tension must take into account the constructed nature of these binary poles whose artificiality is deliberately forgotten. Or, in a process of remembering that cycles on endlessly, autonomously once it has been activated, memory itself is constantly effaced and reinscribed; the end result being, of course, forgetting.

So far, we have seen how the periodization that Jameson advocates is more than a simple exercise in cultural memory. Jamesonian periodization concerns itself with history–as–system; which nostalgia effaces through its own reification. Where nostalgia attempts to metynomically substitute the nodal point of historical event for *history* itself, periodization resists this contraction by exploring the breaks between nodal points. As such, periodization holds the circuit of meaning open through its tacit admission that what distinguishes periodization from nostalgic reification is itself unperiodizable. Periodization, then, operates under the assumption that the radical presence with which nostalgia imbues memory never quite makes good on its totalizing claims: the nodal point cannot maintain its identity as a singularity while attempting to replicate the system from which it derives its nodal qualities. In the final analysis, periodization demands a curious amalgam of faith and skepticism, culminating in the post–modern metaphysics of absence.

> In any case, there is a fundamental difference between the present narrative and those of an older organic history that sought "expressive" unification through analogies and homologies between the forms on such various levels, what will be argued here is a series of significant homologies between the breaks in those forms and their development. What is at stake, then, is not some proposition about the organic unity of the sixties on all its levels, but rather a hypothesis about the rhythm and dynamics of the fundamental situation in which those very different levels develop according to their own internal laws. (Jameson "Periodizing" 179)

So, while the underlying system cannot be theorized in a vacuum, the nodal points which provide the only steady critical positions from which to think about the system resist any approach which sees them as something other than a self–enclosed singularity. Thompson's depiction of the Sixties and the American Dream reflect the cultural nostalgia he can never quite free himself from. However, the subtitle of *F&LLV*—"A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream"—indicates he is aware of the deception. Simultaneously, Thompson accepts and reproduces this romanticized element and yet suspiciously tries to unravel this very same nostalgia. As such, the narrative of *F&LLV* allows him to do both things at once and explore what the result of just such a procedure may be. The Dream, then, represents the conflicted way in which history is constructed—and the ultimately contingent status of periodization.

Chasing the American Dream: *Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas* and *The Great Gatsby*

Early in his writing career, when his status as an itinerant journalist was based more on the rejection of editors than Gonzo wandering, Hunter Thompson filled the

gaps between assignments with writing the next "great American novel." Fascinated with literary luminaries like F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, William Styron and William Faulkner, Thompson would often type out sections of their novels in order to capture the rhythm and energy suffusing great writing (*Proud* 143). While his novel ("Prince Jellyfish") has been published only in excerpts, Thompson's efforts came to fruition in 1971 with *F&LLV*. Thompson's first "novel" clearly benefitted from his exposure to the pillars of twentieth century American literature. One such inheritance can be traced back to Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*. Consider this eulogy spoken for the tragically murdered Gatsby by the narrator Nick Carraway at the end of the book:

> And as I sat there, brooding on the old unknown world, I thought of Gatsby's wonder when he first picked out the green light at the end of Daisy's dock. He had come a long way to this blue lawn and his dream must have seemed so close that he could hardly fail to grasp it. He did not know that it was already behind him, somewhere back in that vast obscurity beyond the city, where the dark fields of the republic rolled on under the night.
>
> Gatsby believed in the green light, the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us. It eluded us then, but that's no matter—tomorrow we will run faster, stretch out our arms farther.... And one fine morning— (189)

Traditionally, criticism of *The Great Gatsby* takes it as a quintessential expression of a particularly American identity. Gatsby is the fulfillment of the American cultural myth of the self–made man (however, Gatsby's tragic end reveals the mercurial nature of this myth, which can never see itself realized.) While the self–made man is a vibrant expression of worldly success embraced by Americans eager to mythologize some sort of cultural identity, the American Dream itself is incised deeper into the national psyche. It is, in effect, the dominant set of drives and desires that impel this self–made man toward success, wealth and renown. In Fitzgerald's novel, the Dream is located in

Gatsby's passion for Daisy, whose voice "is full of money" (127). Fitzgerald projects upon Daisy nodal status: for Gatsby, she becomes a corporeal embodiment of the American Dream. The powerful and murky combination of sex and money[9] have—especially in the mass culture which the Twenties and Sixties had in common—been totemized as essential qualities of the American Dream. The tragedy comes about, in part, because in her reification–as–Dream, Daisy's qualities which seem near–mythical to Gatsby are divested of their content, leaving her a husk, capable only of stylized gestures. Her inability (which is more a cultural inability than an individual one) to measure up to the possibilities of the imaginary give this story a momentum that propels it through the build–up of dramatic tension right into the denouement, with the climax lost somewhere in between. Daisy loses her vitality in the scene where Gatsby informs her husband that Daisy never loved him (136–142). By speaking for Daisy, Gatsby shatters the illusions he has spent so long cultivating; by trying to share her future he stakes a claim to her past. This act of hubris is a greedy form of nostalgia: in Gatsby's desire for an idealized past, his romanticization of Daisy ("She's never loved *you*. She loves *me*.") turns her into a reified figure. The climax of this tale, then, occurs somewhere in the undepicted mental processes of Daisy, the exact point the reader is not privy to where she buckles under the weight of Gatsby's nostalgic vision: "Oh, you want too much!" she cried to Gatsby. "I love you now—isn't that enough? I can't help what's past." She began to sob helplessly. "I did love him

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[9] It is certainly no coincidence that the green light which Fitzgerald used as a trope for Gatsby's Dream was linked both to Daisy (shining from her dock) and suggestive of money.

once—but I loved you too" (140). In his attempt to concretize his idealized image, Gatsby's Daisy collapses under the weight of signification he invests her with. Wanting, then, is always to want too much: satiation is impossible when the *absolute* that is craved is uncontainable within a system of *equivalencies*, of which the materialist discourse of capital is one paradigm.

The ephermereality of the American Dream in Fitzgerald's work comes about when a fundamental relationship of contingency is imagined as an absolute. A concern with the provisionality of consciousness–forming narratives links *The Great Gatsby* with *Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas* in a shared genealogy. Because the absolute remains frustratingly out of reach for myths of cultural legitimization, it similarly escapes the ken of the individual. The result, then, is that the individual pulls up short when faced with, not the limits of his consciousness, but the vast expanse which he cannot penetrate. Thompson's particular mutation within this genealogy is to work through the idea of ontologically untidy individuals, who are constituitively unable to envision a hermetic seal between the self and surrounding culture. The result is an inability to distinguish exactly what an individual is: a conflicted position where the individual knows there is no individual *as such* to have this knowledge.[10] Unable to accept this metaphysical precariousness, the individual retreats into projection. By projecting a fantasized essentialism away from the epicentre of Being, the individual hopes that the fault lines constitutive of this epicentre are a seismic anomaly; the presupposition

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[10] Or, as David Foster Wallace might put it, Thompson unwittingly throws himself into "a skirmish in a larger war in Western philosophy over the idea that presence and unity are ontologically prior to expression" ("Greatly Exaggerated", 140).

being, of course, that the possible for unfractured unity exists at an alternate location. So far, the alternative location I am concerned with is the past, the projection of a nostalgic account upon history. The desires at work in this projection are concerned with shoring up the always–already breached nature of Being, rather than the fantasized site of homogenous unity the future offers.

> We're looking for the American Dream, and we were told it is somewhere in this area. . . . Well, we're here looking for it, 'cause they sent us out here all the way from San Francisco to look for it. That's why they gave us this white Cadillac, they figure that we could catch up to it in that . . . (164)

The Dream remains forever out of reach, just out of eyeshot, just beyond one's grasp. This particular *thrown* quality suggests that the Dream, in a Heideggerian sense, partakes of the essential mystery of being—*dasein*. While the Dream is primarily a nationalistic tool of self–definition, it is forced by the very assumptions it creates to respond to the more subtle and eternal questions underlying this attempt at the superficial definition of what it means to be an American and, more importantly, the response to the universalizing question of being. However, where Heidegger interrogated being as that vertiginous experience of being thrust ahead of oneself, the motion sickness endemic to Fear and Loathing comes from a lurch *backwards*. As Thompson wrote to his friend (and fellow author) William J. Kennedy in the aftermath of the November 1963 assassination: "Neither your children nor mine will ever be able to grasp what Gatsby was after" (*Proud* 420). The death of the president, for Thompson, signalled a decisive shift, where the tide of an idealized American history began to ebb and the constitutive element of a national character—the American Dream—receded back into the historical tide.While the question of being may always

be in front of us, leading us forward, the particular modality of being offered by the American Dream signals a retreat into the past.

Consider the direction of Duke and Gonzo's journey. This novel starts out in Los Angeles, but necessitates a high speed run to Las Vegas. From standing at the edge of the Pacific (what was once America's most significant frontier), to retreating back into the continental interior, we can read this action as the instinctive recoil of our two protagonists when faced with absolute limits.[11] The frontier locates the American subject within a spatial context: to be American is to always be in motion. It is a dynamic identity, a celebration of flux with a marked emphasis on striving—one can never "be" American; rather an American is always already engaged in "becoming" American. However, the jerking backwards of Duke and Dr. Gonzo seems contiguous with an illness identified both by its association to metaphysical vertigo and the images of nauseous spasms Thompson invokes in his trademark phrase "Fear and Loathing." Chasing the American Dream astride a white Cadillac convertible, Thompson depicts a reversal, a retreat into the past, where his thinly veiled autobiographical narrator–cum–doppelganger can confront the totalizing fiction of national identity, a

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[11] Thompson recoils when faced with the reality that the frontier, as much as it signifies imagination and possibility of dreaming, is also the outer limits of what is knowable and thus of experience itself. Citing Chairman Mao's assertion to the Chinese people that "Our nation is like an atom... When this atom's nucleus is smashed, the thermal energy released will have really tremendous power!" Jameson reminds us that Mao eventually "drew back from the ultimate consequences of the process he had set in motion." The atomic imagery Mao uses is significant; we are reminded of the forces at play and the unpredictability inherent in the attempt to harness such power. In the same way, the boundless energy that Sixties dissidents trumpeted carried them right out over the edge of an abyss. ("Periodizing" 208)

confrontation necessitated by the cracking of this monolithic edifice.[12] Though they try to "catch up" to The Dream, what he hunts is ultimately beyond him; when he does finally catch up to its last known location, what he finds is "a huge slab of cracked, scorched concrete in a vacant lot full of weeds. The owner of a gas station across the road said the place had 'burned down about three years ago'" (168).

Subjectivity? Objectivity? Gonzo!

The confusion of personas within *F&LLV* also frames this debate over Being. Thompson's Gonzo techniques thus prove themselves as worthy beyond sheer rhetoric. While Raoul Duke is nominally the narrator of *F&LLV*, the slippage in text between he and Thompson imbues much of *F&LLV* with a fevered, hallucinatory quality. Consider this excerpt, which appears near the end of the story:

> "Where's your friend?" [the casino's bouncers] asked, while we waited.
> "What friend?"
> "The big spic."
> "Look," I said. "I'm a Doctor of Journalism. You'd never catch me hanging around this place with a goddam spic."
> They laughed. "Then what about *this*?" they said. And they confronted me with a big photograph of me and my attorney sitting at a table in the floating bar.

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[12] Within the text, Duke affectionately refers to this white Cadillac as the Whale, a thinly veiled allusion to Moby Dick. In Terry Gilliam's 1998 film adaptation of the novel, the director further cements this connection in the scene where an acid–freaked Dr. Gonzo tries to get Duke to throw a radio into the bathtub with him at the moment where Jefferson Airplane's "White Rabbit" peaks ("I want to get *Higher*," he screams). Gilliam's addition sees Duke brandishing a shower rod like a marlin spike at the dangerously psychotic Dr Gonzo thrashing about in the tub and warning him: "I am Ahab!" Melville's classic tale of the obsessed Captain Ahab's hunt for the white whale provides a literary precursor for Thompson's quest for truth in the form of the American Dream.

> I shrugged. "That's not me," I said. "That's a guy named Thompson. He works for Rolling Stone . . . a really vicious, crazy kind of person. And that guy sitting next to him is a hit–man for the Mafia in Hollywood. Shit, have you *studied* this photograph?" (195)

There are a number of storylines and metatextual threads tangled together in this scene. First, there is the question of ethnicity. Throughout *F&LLV* Thompson refers to his attorney Dr. Gonzo as Samoan, a maneuver Thompson later admitted was to direct scrutiny away from the Chicano Oscar Acosta's role in the infamous weekend.[13] This intentional confusion of Acosta for Gonzo and the permeability it suggests between fact and fiction is hammered home by Thompson's reference to the photograph. The fact that this very photograph was published on the dust jacket of the first edition literalizes Thompson's emphasis on the dynamic fluidity existing between the worlds, both between and beyond the covers.[14] The *seemingly nonsensical* possibility that this fictional character recognizes his author and dismisses him as just one of a number of characters forces us to confront what exactly we consider the limits of an individual. Duke appears as a fictionalized version of Thompson himself, but he is so close to the "original"—or at least close to the Gonzo projection Thompson himself embraced—that the difference is negligible.Thompson further

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[13] Acosta was not pleased with Thompson apparently well–intentioned gesture. The publication of the book was nearly halted because litigation seemed imminent. As Acosta said: "Hunter has stolen my soul! He has taken my best lines and used me. He has wrung me dry for material" (Whitmer 183). Clearly, this incident with Acosta points to Thompson's confusion of fact and fiction, real people and characters.

[14] Terry Gilliam worked this moment of confused self–recognition into his 1998 film. In a flashback to a scene set in the Fillmore Auditorium, Johnny Depp–playing–Thompson drifts along in a reverie, jarred out of it by seeing Hunter S. Thompson (the real one) sitting at a table, staring at him as he walks by.

problematizes this debate throughout his career: after the publication of *F&LLV*, Raoul Duke does the impossible, stepping out of a text in order to take Rolling Stone's post as Sports Editor. The fact that Thompson has continued to use "Raoul Duke" as a transparent *nom de plume* reveals *F&LLV* is more than a simple novel—it is ground zero for the Gonzo shockwave of Thompson's creative/critical project (the two are inseparable).

Realizing that the American Dream is non–materializable within Jameson's objective situation (to presume otherwise would be to reproduce nostalgic reification), Thompson decides upon tactics which will allow him to transcend the limitations of the objective situation. Given that he worked within the relatively rigid constraints of the journalism industry, Thompson's break with the traditional practices of reportage in order to cover the story implies a devaluation of objectivity. This decision for a more subjective viewpoint reflects a broader process of atomization within the objective situation as a whole. With the traditional route to political change blocked by a rigidity imposed by America's Cold War bunker mentality, dissidents had to reformulate a politics that could overcome the straitjacketing of the objective system. Oppositionality, at least in the realm of popular politics and in the court of public opinion, was no longer an objective possibility. Therefore, the alternative to the hegemony of the "Establishment" was to be found in more subjective possibilities. Returning to Thompson's 1994 eulogy for Nixon—a document valuable for the critical distance Thompson gains over the span of two decades in his examination of America during the 'sixties and 'seventies—he paints Nixon as the lightning rod for the shift

from the objective to the subjective, in politics, in journalism, in popular culture.

> It was the built–in blind spots of the Objective rules and dogma [of journalism] that allowed Nixon to slither into the White House in the first place. He looked so good on paper that you could almost vote for him sight unseen. He seemed so all–American, so much like Horatio Alger, that he was able to slip through the cracks of Objective Journalism. You had to get Subjective to see Nixon clearly, and the shock of recognition was often painful. (Thompson *Songs* 243)

Getting "Subjective" happened on many fronts in this era. On the socio–political end of things, the rise of the feminist movement, the nascent Gay Liberation movement, Quebec separatism as well as the varied nationalisms of non–Caucasian races all point to the developing paradigm of identity politics. Rather than subscribe to the traditional, objective methods of political action, the lobby industry metastasized and swiftly insinuated itself as a mediator between the voices of prominently identified and sharply–defined interest groups and the apparatus of party politics. For Thompson personally and professionally (the boundary between the two can be incredibly difficult to discern) getting "Subjective" meant the development of Gonzo journalism. With the help of his holy trinity of alcohol, amphetamines and LSD (by the Eighties he replaced LSD with cocaine—probably one of the reasons his output has certainly slowed and lost the lustre of his earlier work), Thompson attempted to get to the heart of the situation not by stringing together a rational, plausible tale out of the available facts and testimonies, but rather through invention, exaggeration, and a rampant disregard for journalistic convention: "[Gonzo Journalism] is a style of 'reporting' based on William Faulkner's idea that the best fiction is far more *true* than any kind of journalism—and the best journalists have always known this" (*Shark* 106). Most important was his

transformation of the journalist from anonymous scribe recording events impartially and invisibly to the Gonzo hack as centre of the story itself: the story exists as Thompson's reactions (always partisan) to the events unfolding.[15] Because of this, the story is ongoing. *F&LLV* is in many senses a chapter in the larger narrative of Hunter S. Thompson than it is a self–contained, independent text. Thompson recognizes this (in a traditionalist sense) "failing" in *F&LLV*, prefacing his reservations in the "Jacket Copy to *F&LLV*":

> ... in the meantime we have this failed experiment in Gonzo Journalism, the certain truth of which will never be established. That much is definite. *Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas* will have to be chalked off as a frenzied experiment, a fine idea that went crazy about halfway through . . . a victim of its own conceptual schizophrenia, caught & finally crippled in that vain, academic limbo between "journalism" & "fiction." (*Shark* 109)

Whether conceptual schizophrenia or a psychotic break, the rise of personal subjectivity within the objective situation of the Sixties is symptomatic of a specific process of nostalgic reification. Given the uniform exogenous social influences (or rather, exogenous influences which were ultimately relatable to one another through mass culture: the systematization of equivalences) pop culture fantasized an endogenous identity. Personal subjectivity—while still a multifarious and heterogenous reflection of society as an aggregate of distinct personalities—legitimated and was

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[15] Having said that, much of Thompson's Gonzo work depends on a (sometimes comic) foil. In what is generally taken as Thompson's first piece of Gonzo Journalism—coverage of the Kentucky Derby—Thompson views the debauchery of a Southern tradition through the naive eyes of illustrator Ralph Steadman. In *F&LLV* Thompson/Duke plays off the energy of Acosta/Gonzo. In the first example, Thompson uses Steadman as the "straight man", while he himself takes on that role in deference to Acosta's excess.

legitimated by the shared objective situation. This desire for a consistent (and constitutive) subjective identity (spirit of the Sixties) to match the one demarcated by the objective situation subsequently shattered the belief that there was a once–solid relationship between the two. Subjectivity, both formed within and obsessed by this breach, is very much a process of fleeing out of the rupture while imagining an absolute subjectivity as a function of the idealized nexus of subjectivity/objectivity untroubled by this originary schism. The end result, as we shall see in the next chapter, is that in the face of an aggregate which imagines itself as homogenous and uncompromised, fugitive subjectivity—of which Gonzo journalism is only one mode of expression—is capable only of negative critique.

Chapter Two: One–Dimensional Society and Negative Critique

> For nobody was adequate to the 60s which, for any thinking person, was a period of noble aspiration and apocalyptic dimensions built into a double bind. It is that double bind, with its universal paranoia and ethos of performance, which is reflected in certain talismanic works of the periods [such as F&LLV or Thompson's Gonzo career]....
>
> Power was never seriously threatened by the movement, as it is not now by the politics of deconstruction [and more recently, the rhetoric of anti–globalization]. Long before literature caught up with the dispersion of its authorizing Text, the exchange mechanisms of bourgeois capitalism had grown immensely diversified and multinational, so that the invisible network of power which Foucault taught us to recognize may be theorized but not contained. (Blau 320)

Herbert Blau's meditations on the Sixties posits a double bind which, though not identical, is homologous in its conflicted status to the one examined in the previous chapter. However, where Thompson's pursuit of the American Dream is constituitively flawed by his suspicions about the phantasmatic status of his quarry, Blau presents a discussion of power unmediated by metaphor. What links both formulations of the double bind is a tortured form of self awareness: in both cases, the American Dream and/or power can be theorized, but not contained or confronted. In light of this double bind, Thompson invents Gonzo journalism as a form of what Herbert Marcuse would call negative critique.

One reason why I have introduced the subject of power into a discussion on Thompson is to aid in examining his nascent political career. While the previous chapter focused on the double bind inherent in Thompson's linked conception of the American Dream and the Sixties, this one will examine the ways in which he

transferred Gonzo literary techniques to the political stage. His anger, his fear and loathing, the instinctive recoil that powers most of *F&LLV*, these all hint at a larger picture that is infuriating to Thompson because of his ability to sense its presence and still not clearly see it. More importantly, as a reporter, his impaired vision makes it impossible to describe, to articulate, to translate this lifelong subject of concern. Instead, the best he can do is the sense of doom that he conveys with his trademark phrase "Fear and Loathing." Because of his conceptual stuttering when faced with a society he can never separate himself from enough to gain the reflective space necessary for comprehensive critique, I will refer to the work of one social theorist, a contemporary of Thompson's, whose clear and reasoned diagnosis of America succeeds where Thompson's inarticulate rage fails. (It should be noted, though, that Hunter Thompson's failure is a cultural—rather than individual—one. His incoherence only sounds startling when considered alongside the deep silence of popular culture, which in its reluctance to examine its "self," reveals a preference for reified nostalgia rather than living history.) Applying Herbert Marcuse's theory of "one–dimensional society" (the capability of advanced industrial society for total social control through its ability to contain its own contradictions) to Thompson's life and work will enable us to extract what is only implied, suggested and inferred. This totalizing element to contemporary life is both a symptom and a cause of the failure of critical (or dialectical) thought, which—burdened by contingency—can only confront one–dimensionality through theory rather than through direct praxis.

Steadfast in his Mountain Redoubt: Freak Power in the Rockies

By dealing in politics you accept their terms. Politics is economics, and when you deal in that league you are on the fatbellies' home court. All political revolutions start out to create a frame of reference, and end by accepting one. Marxism is over the hump for the time being...
——Letter to Paul Semonin[1]

By the end of the Sixties, the counterculture was in full retreat from the fatbellies, and Thompson himself was hot on their heels, pausing only for rear-guard actions.[2] While his career flowered during this period of fatbelly retrenchment and for a brief time afterwards (until about 1979), Thompson's celebrity came from the popularization of his style of reportage: Gonzo journalism. While much has been said about Gonzo stylistics—most commonly in literary analyses concerning Thompson's

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[1] Published in *The Proud Highway* (453).

[2] Fatbellies is an interesting coinage for Thompson. Usually, when he is in a castigating mood, he bestializes his objects of scorn, emphasizing bestial qualities and behaviour. However, fatbellies suggests something other than the instinctive violence and irrationality Thompson associates with his animal metaphors. In one sense, the term is used by Thompson metonyomically, he substitutes a particular trait for the whole in order to emphasize his visceral disgust with the essential weakness of his subject. But there is also a curious reversal: we are presented with an image of a creature that makes a virtue out of its weakness. The belly is almost always a vulnerable area for any animal, and the first area an aggressor chooses to attack. Consider his eulogy for Nixon:

> He had the fighting instincts of a badger trapped by hounds. The badger will roll over on its back and emit a smell of death, which confuses the dogs and lures them in for the traditional ripping and tearing action. But it is usually the badger who does the ripping and tearing. It is a beast that fights best on its back: rolling under the throat of an enemy and seizing it by the head with all four claws. (*Songs* 239)

double duty as both narrator and protagonist of his stories[3]—for all the fame it garnered Thompson, Gonzo journalism is a rear–guard action *par excellence*. Way back in March of 1970, the first piece of Gonzo journalism ("The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved") was printed in *Scanlan's Monthly*. In it, Thompson dives into his journalistic account of the Derby by convincing a drunken Southerner that the Derby was about to be marred by a Black Panther riot.[4] Thompson's Black Panther

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[3] The confusion between narrator and protagonist may have originated as a clever literary strategy for Thompson, but in an ambiguous turn of events representative of the double bind, turned from literary emancipation to personal imprisonment. Thompson during the Eighties—having little in the way of productive literary or journalistic output—was a regular on the college speaking circuit and during these public (and most other) appearances acted the role of *F&LLV*'s Duke, by all accounts embracing the one–dimensionality of what would become his own caricature. For a fuller explanation of Thompson's bifurcated role as author and character, see Joseph Hellman's, *Fables of Fact* (68).

[4] Below is a representative sample from the Derby piece, and of Thompson's Gonzo work in general. It includes embellishment as a stylistic device, while indulging in fear and loathing when faced with this caricature of what appears in *F&LLV* as "a caricature of a used–car salesman from Dallas." More importantly, the status of this piece as a rear–guard action is found in the second paragraph, in his characterization of Nixon, whose pronouncements instinctively repel even the abstraction of the stock market.

> I felt a little guilty abut jangling that poor bugger's brains with that evil fantasy [about the Black Panthers]. But what the hell? Anybody who wanders around the world saying, "Hell yes, I'm from Texas," deserves whatever happens to him. And he had, after all, come here once again to make a nineteenth–century ass of himself in the middle of some jaded, atavistic freakout with nothing to recommend it except a very saleable "tradition." Early in our chat, Jimbo had told me that he hasn't missed a Derby since 1954. "The little lady won't come anymore," he said. "She just grits her teeth and turns me loose for this one. And when I say 'loose' I do mean *loose*! I toss ten–dollar bills around like they were goin' outa style! Horses, whiskey, women . . . shit, there's women in this town that'll do *anything* for money."
>
> 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

fantasy operates on a humourous level of playing a joke on the affable if wretched Texan. But it also serves as a laboratory experiment. By playing on the Texan's fears and by turning him loose, believing that the worst will happen, Thompson gets his Gonzo character: a stereotype taken to the extremes of its natural behaviour; the circus–mirror distortion of the banality of American life. "Unlike most of the others in the press box," Thompson explains to his readers, "we didn't give a hoot in hell what was happening on the track. We had come there to watch the *real* beasts perform" (*Shark* 30). The "we" mentioned here is significant. Thompson's companion for the Derby piece is English illustrator Ralph Steadman, whose caricatures have become associated with Thompson's work. In an interviewer with one of his biographers, Thompson relates that the Derby piece was based upon Steadman's reactions—who had never been to America—to the Derby crowd.

Reading the bestial into the actions of the average American is a central tactic in Thompson's rear–guard actions. To consider him a literary guerilla, we must map out the parameters of the conflict, his motivations for waging clandestine war on the fatbellies and his prospects for victory (and speaking of which, what exactly would constitute victory). While the previous chapter laid out the "objective situation" of the Sixties, this one takes as its thesis the contention that the political and cultural experiments of the Sixties, though fatally compromised, represented the last flowering of belief in the dialectical model and that this is reflected in his work. However, when the dialectical model withered on the vine in terms of its ability to effect real change,

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had any money I'd invest it in the stock market." And the market, meanwhile, continued its grim slide. (*Shark* 27)

Thompson's social criticism was fissured by his ambiguity towards the questions of where and how to proceed. The Great Refusal of the counterculture found itself in the ambiguous position of professing a total rupture with Establishment while in effect reproducing a dialectical relationship by taking an oppositional stance. This unintentional collusion with the society they meant to reject illustrates the ability of society at large to contain its own contradictions, an amorphous embrace that so enraged Thompson that he had to resort to the extreme emotional reaction of "Fear and Loathing" to escape it. On one hand, his bitter parody reflects the ethic of the underground attitude towards the "Establishment." Without a legitimate oppositional position to rally around, countercultural attacks were diffused—a scattershot approach that exhausted itself against the interminable flank of mass society. Thompson's frustration with the impossibility of victory within the system is exacerbated by the difficulty in thinking "positively" outside the system, hence the nihilistic character of his critique. And yet, Thompson does not quite fit the nihilist label; while he is self–destructive, it serves him as a cunning strategy rather than as an end in itself (or, at least as much one as the other). While his radical libertarianism and healthy contempt for the unresponsive political system of the times points towards a predilection for anarchy, Thompson realized that the only way for dissenters to protect their right to protest (and to expect that their protests actually be listened to) was by working within the system that had so deeply disappointed them. This alchemy of cynicism and idealism creates a strange tension in his work; because of his strong commitments to both ends of the spectrum, he can never truly adopt either position. As such, we can

read his drug use and destructive tendencies as veiled attempts to defer the decision; to cope with the agonizing suspension between the two. Gonzo critique, if well–intentioned, suffers from bad faith as its social critique is caught up in avoiding the difficulties of the objective situation. In order to avoid definitively choosing between subjectivity and objectivity, he adopts the aesthetic of the Edge, a calculated deployment of apocalyptic rhetoric designed to shock his readers to awareness that negotiating between cynicism and idealism is as much the responsibility of a citizen as it is Gonzo antics. And so Thompson went to work, running for the elected position as the Sheriff of Aspen, Colorado. What he would later describe as "the Aspen technique" reflects this complex series of negotiations.

Thompson's immersion into Aspen's local politics stands as his most significant rear–guard action. Instead of exercises in literary terrorism (such as his treatment of the poor Texan, above) Thompson accepted the challenges (and poor odds) inherent in what would be, politically speaking, a pitched battle. After the rout of the Democratic Convention of 1968, Thompson was ready to return to the fray, to challenge the fatbellies on their home court.[5] At first, Thompson saw himself strictly

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[5] Thompson relates:

> [L]ooking back I'm still not sure what launched me. Probably it was Chicago—that brain–raping week in August of '68. I went to the Democratic Convention a journalist, and returned a raving beast.
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> For me, that week at Chicago was far worse than the worst bad acid trip I'd ever heard rumours about. It permanently altered my brain chemistry, and my first new idea—when I finally calmed down—was an absolute conviction that there was no possibility for any truce, for me, in a nation that could hatch and be proud of a malignant monster like Chicago. (*Shark* 167–68)

as a behind–the–scenes man. He organized the mayoral campaign of Joe Edwards, a local lawyer, under the Freak Power banner. When Edwards lost by only six votes ("Actually, we lost by one vote, but five of our absentee ballots didn't get here in time"), Thompson realized that:

> ...if Freak Power can do that [win the election and 'snap the spine of the local/money/politics establishment'] in Aspen, it can also do it in other places. But if it *can't* be done here, one of the few places in America where we can work off a proven power base—then it is hard to imagine it working in any other place with fewer natural advantages. (*Shark* 172)

The realization led Thompson to throw his hat into the race for Sheriff of Pitkin County, (containing Aspen and outlying areas).[6] His platform was pro–drug and anti–land development. Threatening to rip up the streets of Aspen and resod them, Thompson also proposed renaming the mountain retreat "Fat City" (to end the practice of land speculators cashing in on Aspen's prestigious reputation) and controlling drug sales—"to punish dishonest dope dealers" (*Shark* 173). Even with the outrageous promises, Thompson still garnered a respectable third of the vote. The reasons for his relative success lead us back into the Sixties.

> The original idea had been to lash together a one–shot coalition and demoralize the local money/politics establishment by winning a major election before the enemy knew what was happening. Aspen's liberals are a permanent minority who have never won *anything*, despite their constant struggles . . . and Aspen's fabled "underground" is a far larger minority that has never even *tried* to win anything.

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[6] In an interview given after the fact, Thompson indicated that he was ambiguous in his desire for office. While this could be easily chalked up to the sour grapes of a losing party, Thompson pointed out that his campaign served as a smokescreen for his friend Ned Vare, who was running for the seat of county commissioner at the same time (a much more politically powerful position than Sheriff). (Whitmer 174)

> So *power* was our first priority. The platform—or at least our public version of it—was too intentionally vague to be anything but a flexible, secondary tool for wooing the liberals and holding our coalition. (*Shark* 166)

Remembering the efficacy of mass movements, Thompson sought to turn back the political clock to the previous decade; by utilizing the techniques of successfully politicized protest, he attempted to re–establish a political dialectic which allowed the voters once again to choose black or white, instead of hesitating over shades of grey. Obviously, this is a romanticized vision of political activism in the Sixties, but Thompson counted on it, a nostalgia for a short time ago when all things seemed possible. By utilizing the nostalgia of the electorate, Thompson shows how, in the contest for the Sheriff's star—as in his best journalism—the energies released in the fraught relationship between the cynic and idealist can be put to constructive purposes rather than simple nihilism. Given a common goal for both the cynic (to run an undeniably radical campaign and rub the noses of the Establishment in their own rules) and the idealist (the possibility of changing the system from *within*) the two combine, for a little while at least, in a symbiotic relationship: the generation of a true synthesis and transcendence of the dialectic.

But he lost, and once again the grand sense of possibility that characterized the Sixties came crashing down to earth. Rear–guard actions seldom win wars. However, though denied gainful employment, Thompson did take something away from his brief political career.

> This is the essence of what some people call 'the Aspen technique' in politics: neither opting out of the system, nor working within it... but calling its bluff, by using its strength to turn it back on itself... and by always assuming that the people in power are not smart. By the end of the Edwards campaign, I was

> convinced, despite my lifelong bias to the contrary, that the Law was actually on our side. Not the cops, or the judges or the politicians—but the actual Law, itself, as printed in the dull and musty lawbooks that we constantly had to consult because we had no other choice. (*Shark* 163)

While the objective limits of the historical situation may militate against dialectical social relations, the very conditions of possibility—the universal, the "Law"—for this dialectic remain latent. The disillusionment fuelling Thompson's savage critique came from the quality of his failed idealism: that the "promise" of the Sixties—to unearth this dialectic and use it for dynamic, positive change—lay inherent within an American society too timid to embrace it. Hence his romanticization of the Sixties and its corollary, a wildly overstated contempt for his contemporaries. Thompson's attitude to the prospects of Freak Power ("But if it *can't* be done here, one of the few places in America where we can work off a proven power base—then it is hard to imagine it working in any other place with fewer natural advantages") reflects a reasoned appraisal of the situation. Without a victory within the hegemonic system, re–establishing a legitimate opposing stance through dialectical thought within the system would become nearly impossible, on a large scale. In a typical blend of cynicism and idealism, Thompson hedged his bets. The rear–guard action, though a pitched battle on his enemies' turf, was just that, a rear–guard action that took its own inevitable defeat as a given. If Freak Power had triumphed in the Rockies, it would have been a political aberration, as much as it would have been a moral victory for those opposed to an increasingly rigid and unresponsive political system. The critical theory of Herbert Marcuse will shed further light on the importance of dialectical thought (and its absence) to healthy and dynamic culture.

The dialectical notion that conflict and contradiction could lead to improved society through compromise mediated between opposing interests was exploded as a progressive myth. And with the splintering of coalition politics and the furtive retreat of the counterculture, a heterogenous pool of interests that had for a brief moment in time during the Sixties come together as mass movement lapsed into atomized indifference.[7] However, because one pole in the dialectical relationship between two strains of popular American consciousness collapsed, the fact that the other "survived" is not necessarily a sign of its own inner stability. By losing any challenge from a united opposition to justify itself, American mass society drifted into a new state of being, what Nixon would presciently call "the silent majority." Or so the story goes. What might be more applicable is to say that hegemonic social interests define those interests contrary to their own; the counterculture as a phenomenon, then, coalesced because pop culture[8]—reacting to challenges to its own autonomy—created a zone where opposing interests could converge. So, pop culture eviscerates its opposition by defining the counterculture as a modality of protest, rather than the specifics of that (those) protest(s). Simultaneously—hence, the double bind—pop culture maintains its

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[7] While I may leave myself open to charges that this statement unwittingly reflects a romanticized account of the Sixties, the historical record is undeniable. The convergence of civil rights, feminism, anti–war protest and a developing popular culture which had become self–aware to the point of questioning its own development; these all coalesced into a general questioning of the structures of authority and the rights and responsibilites of the citizen. And more to the point, it reflects the uneasiness of Americans adjusting to citizenship as an expanded category (i.e. White males were joined by women, Chicanos, Blacks, etc.).

[8] This is not synomous with the "silent majority," and a bit of a stretch of pop culture itself, but it will have to stand for the moment.

hegemonic status by creating an Other whose protest both confirms and reproduces pop culture's hegemonic status. In both cases, neither pop culture nor the counterculture proves itself to pre–exist the other. There is no essentiality at work in determining positions of hegemony and positions of opposition. However, essentiality is often read into accounts of the Sixties: a process we have explored above in the discussion of nostalgia. Contingency is vertiginous, a condition instinctively repulsive to any formulation of subjectivity (which requires at least the illusion of constancy). The real "failure" of the Sixties—the dissolution of (artificial) consensus—is paradoxically the success of pop culture in materializing (reifying) its ideals. As the last several decades have shown, the nostalgic absorption of countercultural ideals into pop culture (recalling Frank's *Conquest of Cool*) has ensured that nodal points like Thompson's journalism must be read heterogenously, as they encapsulate both countercultural protest and pop culture hegemony. One of the definitive characteristics of post–Sixties pop culture is the inescapable awareness of one–dimensionality, or the vertigo of trying to find an absolute foothold amidst the chaos of total flux. The dialectical system collapsed under the revelation of its own artificiality. Indeed, as Sven Birketts ponders in his article on Thompson's surge of popularity in the late '90s, "in the war between American society and Hunter S. Thompson... Both lost" (5).

One–Dimensional Society

"From this moment on, let all those who feel that Americans can be as easily led to beauty as to ugliness, to truth as to public relations, to joy as to bitterness, be said to suffering from Hunter Thompson's disease."

—Kurt Vonnegut[9]

Before I delve into the particulars of theorizing the 60s, I would like to consider that particular "decade"[10] in a broader context; where it fit into the "long view" of American history. Obviously, the Sixties were the site of great historical change (the popular explosion of the counterculture, civil rights, the feminist movement), but these events, while of great historical magnitude in and of themselves, can be read as symptomatic of a more subtle and wide–reaching current of change flowing at the very edges of the American consciousness. Generally, I would describe this "change" as the shift from objectivism to subjectivism in all spheres of American life, be it political, cultural, etc. Allied with the rise of the Cold War and the bifurcation of the world into spheres of capitalist and communist influence, the dialectical possibilities of political difference were subsumed into a rhetoric of not opposition, but treachery. Consider the machinations of Senator Joe McCarthy and the Senate House Committee on Un–American activities or the purging of Communist elements from the American labour movement. The traditional zone of political opposition within Western

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[9] Quoted from Vonnegut's review of F&LCT ("A Political Disease" *Harper's*, July 1973: 94).

[10] Frederic Jameson argues that the Sixties, as we tend to consider them, were chronologically untidy. Instead of the superficial range of '60 to '69, he views "The Sixties" as a historically distinct era that needs to be stretched past the decade mark to accomodate its structural limits. Jameson identifies the "natural" punctuation between the Sixties and Seventies as occuring somewhere around 1973–'74 with the onset of the energy and economic crisis ("Periodizing" 205).

capitalist democracies, Marxist and socialist thought, was rigidly identified with a Soviet-style communism. Ideological difference was transformed into treachery; difference of opinion was indicative of a dangerously unreliable mindset. One only has to look at the publishing eruption of spy novels as symptomatic of a citizenry deeply worried about the threat of infiltration, infestation and invasion of the state, which was seen more and more as a homogenous body and therefore subject to such ills.[11] Indeed, F&LLV takes advantage of the paranoia presupposed by the popularity of the spy genre and owes some of its narrative structure to the television spy program *Mission Impossible*. Thompson makes this intertextual reference direct in one of the scenes of relative sobriety, where Duke and Dr. Gonzo watch an episode of the show while they unwind (124). The reference also makes indirect appearances. As Raoul Duke explains to the hapless hitchhiker he picks up with Dr. Gonzo in the early going of the novel: "this is a very ominous assignment—with overtones of extreme personal danger" (6). Thompson uses this paranoid sense of isolation of a spy in enemy territory to point depict the one-dimensionality of America. As he declares to his friend Paul Semonin in an April, 1964 letter:[12]

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[11] A corollary to the popular figure of the "spy" is that of the "terrorist," a post-modern trope whose ideological nature is central to explaining its particular resonance. Jameson argues that the "terrorist" is "one of the privileged forms in which an ahistorical society imagines radical social change... Terrorism is a collective obsession, a symptomatic fantasy of the American political unconsciousness, which demands decoding and analysis in its own right." (203-204)

[12] The epistolary relationship between Thompson and Semonin is crucial to understanding Thompson' political instincts. Semonin, a self-professed Marxist who attended graduate school in Ghana, often infuriated Thompson with his political views, but more often than not prodded Thompson to work through his own opinions about

> The Syndicate has taken over here with a vengeance. It's a massive bandwagon... there is no dissent. None. This sheep mentality has given me the fear; it's a very German thing and the negroes in this country are up against more than they know. The brute conservatism of the U.S. is the number one fact of our politics. (*Proud* 452)

This "brute conservatism" was by 1964 a well–entrenched position. To Thompson's eyes, the sheep mentality was reminiscent of the German populace's tacit approval of fascist government during the reign of the Third Reich ("it's a very German thing"). The loathing that the American public held for any demonstration of difference or opposition to established social and political norms was revealed by Chicago Tribune columnist Herb Caen's derisive dismissal of the growing counterculture founded in the protest of the Beat Generation. Labelling these youthful dissidents as "beatniks" Caen linked the politics of protest with Soviet achievements in the space program: launching

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life in America. Thompson is perhaps best known for his vitriolic rants; a rhetorical attribute which makes him amusing to read and his positions on various issues fairly obvious. Conversely though, he is rarely called on his bluster and challenged to develop these positions which it may seem to the casual reader he holds to for little more than entertainment purposes. Having said that, Thompson despised the academic mindset which allowed the absent Semonin to abstract situations Thompson was living through and viscerally experiencing.

> I am snatching around for tools and you offer me cookies. This is a tougher world than that, and the biggest enemy of all is the face on the clock.... I just wish to hell you could convince me you are on to something real, instead of just another theoretical escape hatch from the Big Business, which is all too mean and private for your kind of public panaceas.... You are a privileged specimen. Which is not all that bad while it lasts, but don't kid yourself into thinking you're a representative creature. Nor am I, certainly, but then I know it. And when you tell me to get off to Berkeley for the sit–ins I say no thanks I think I'll go to the beach and run in the fog and try to stay human in the smell of my own sweat. In a world like this I want to stay as tough as possible and I've never derived much strength from sitting in a mob and chanting in unison. Which is not to say that the Berkeley mobs are not right. They are. Joan Baez is over there telling them so. And if I thought they were as serious as they are noisy, I might even pitch in. (*Proud* 474)

the first satellite Sputnik (Charters, xxii). The etymology of "Beatnik" suggests that dissatisfaction with the "American way" was at best an immature act of denial, or at worst the revelation of insidious Soviet machinations striking at America's youth, a sort of mass Manchurian candidate recruitment drive. In either case, the legitimacy of genuine political and moral opposition to the increasingly rigid and homogenous monolith of American government and the values of what Richard Nixon would later term "the silent majority" was discounted and disparaged.[13]

Marcuse weighs in

With the release of *One Dimensional Man* in 1964, Herbert Marcuse stepped forward as the intellectual godfather of the New Left. Articulating a series of grievances informed by his work with the Frankfurt School for Social Theory and his active engagement with the dialectical materialism of the Marxist tradition and concern with the individual subject exemplified in Freudian psychoanalysis (and more notably, his attempt to reconcile the two with one another), Marcuse tapped directly into the angst felt by felt by the baby boomer demographic (youth culture) of the Sixties.[14] By

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[13]Thompson's relationship with Nixon is central to the tensions and anger which characterize his work. Thompson saw Nixon as his arch–nemesis and eulogized him as "a hubris–crazed monster from the bowels of the American dream with a heart full of hate and an overweening lust to be President." In his essay comparing *F&LLV* to *Hamlet*, Edward Parkinson argues that "Nixon becomes a Claudius figure, an evil father American never wanted, yet somehow elected" (32).

[14] For two accounts laying out Marcuse's philosophical project, see Douglas Kellner's introduction to the second edition of *One Dimensional Man* and Joan Alway's "Marxism Revisited: Marcuse's Search for a Subject".

outlining a vision of society which was ruled by the subtle repressions of entrenched interests, Marcuse created a critical infrastructure for the dissenters of the period to work through their sense of alienation.[15] The one–dimensionality that Marcuse reveals at the heart of advanced industrial society is a useful concept to deploy in unpacking Hunter Thompson's fears and reservations about the state of contemporary America.

One of the reasons I have chosen Marcusean one–dimensionality as a theoretical framework is its chronological proximity to Thompson's more popular (and less rigorously thought–out and developed) form of criticism. While Thompson's denunciations may be fuelled by a wild combination of idealistic passion and obscene imagination, he rarely (well, never) provides a sustained explanation of *why* he believes what he does. Without any sort of theoretical framework guiding his career as a professional cynic, Thompson's diatribes are prone to seeming provisional—a necessary evil for a journalist, but one which an academic like Marcuse can ill afford to indulge. However, while my examination of Thompson's critique depends on the positions he takes when confronted by specific situations (for example, Kennedy's assassination or the spectacle of Nixon's political career in its entirety, both instances referred to in the previous chapter) rather than a comprehensive, sustained articulation of his own critical apparatus, I would be totally remiss to suggest that he does not have one and that his outcries are more the matter of convenience than conscience. Instead, I would like this chapter to read as an exercise in critical forensics.

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[15] In an interesting case of intra–class conflict, American President Dwight Eisenhower referred to these interests as the "military–industrial–complex." Nowadays, that complex has been replaced by "multi–national corporations."

Aside from a few grave asides found in his journalism or the more developed commentary found in his letters, Thompson does not afford his readers the luxury of a thorough–going, extensively mapped–out critical vantage point. So, I would like to extrapolate one from what he does say, with the help of Marcuse. Before I can plunge into this, however, a few words must be devoted to Marcuse's description of Thompson's America as one–dimensional.

In an early essay "The Affirmative Character of Culture" (1937) Herbert Marcuse explains his title by describing Western culture as "affirmative," a bourgeois trait that is marked by bad conscience. Where people in antiquity accepted that there would be an elite marked for a life of leisure and an underclass to support them, the bourgeois denied that any such fundamental inequality existed (93–95). That the Western capitalist mode of social and economic organization is plagued by structural and constitutive inequalities I accept here as fact; a fact which Marcuse returns to repeatedly in his own work, which we can read as an incredulous working–through the implications that such bald facts are glossed over by a culture invested in the denial of their facticity. In other words, Marcuse envisions the peculiar structures and order of capitalist society as always–already haunted by its own ghosts; the rationalization of culture is an inherently false logic continually frustrated by its own fundamental irrationality. Because the cathedral to capitalist thought, technological rationality, is built upon a swamp rather than solid foundations, Marcuse is intent on exposing the fundamental irrationality of its origins for what they really are: the projection of nostalgic longing for an endless feedback loop of rationality stretching back into the

entirety of bourgeois memory, allowing them to forget (excise) their impiously irrational beginnings.[16]

Technological rationality is a term Marcuse arrives at in 1964's *One–Dimensional Man* after a career spent dealing the implications of a concept that lies at the very centre of his critical project. In 1937, Marcuse uses the term *res cogitans* as an early prototype of technological rationality. In the nearly three decades separating *One–Dimensional Man* from "The Affirmative Character of Culture", this semantic shift signifies a similar evolution in Marcuse's focus from *describing* society to *interrogating* the ways in which society legitimizes itself by obscuring the conditions of possibility for description itself. "The unification of opposites which characterizes the commercial and political style is one of the many ways in which discourse and communication make themselves immune against the expression of protest and refusal," Marcuse argues (*One-Dimensional* 90). Because technological rationality allows affirmative culture to contain its own contradictions (right down to its basic contradiction: deriving a rational system from irrational conditions), any sort of positive challenge is foreclosed.

> Once considered the primary offense against logic, the contradiction now appears as a principle of the logic of manipulation—realistic caricature of dialectics. It is the logic of a society which can afford to dispense with logic and play with destruction, a society with technological mastery of mind and matter. (69)

Marcuse goes on to state that:

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[16]"Man does not live by bread alone," Marcuse echoes the Bible, adding a new twist to the old parable. "[T]his truth is thoroughly falsified by the interpretation that spiritual nourishment is an adequate substitute for too little bread." ("Affirmative" 109)

> This transformation of negative into positive opposition points up the problem: the "wrong" organization, in becoming totalitarian on internal grounds, refutes the alternatives. Certainly, it is quite natural, and does not seem to call for an explanation *in depth*, that the tangible benefits of the system are considered worth defending—especially in view of the repelling force of present day communism which appears to be the historical alternative. But it is natural only to a mode of thought and behaviour which is unwilling and perhaps even incapable of comprehending what is happening and why it is happening, a mode of thought and behaviour which is immune against any other than the established rationality. To the degree to which they correspond to the given reality, thought and behaviour express a false consciousness, responding to and contributing to the preservation of a false order of facts. And this false consciousness has become embodied in the prevailing technical apparatus which in turn reproduces it. (145)

Thompson's experiments in perspective and modes of consciousness in Gonzo journalism represent a career–long attack against just such a false consciousness. His embrace of seemingly irrational and inflammatory rhetoric along with his dictate (catalyzed in his coverage of Nixon) that journalism had to get "subjective" is a response to what to Marcuse diagnoses as the illness of technological rationality. However, while he always feels impelled to hold a mirror up to his countrymen, he recognizes the futility of his actions. Hence the drug use, hence the savage tongue with which to excoriate those who quite simply *refuse* to understand just what they have become. But why are his attempts futile, and why does he keep trying? Let's return to the fatbellies: "Politics is economics, and when you deal in that league you are on the fatbellies' home court," Thompson counsels his friend Semonin. This leads us back to technological rationality, which Marcuse argues legitimizes and reproduces affirmative culture. The resulting conditions of life within an affirmative culture girded by technological rationality is one–dimensionality:

> [A]dvanced industrial society is confronted with the possibility of a materialization of ideals. The capabilities of this society are progressively reducing the sublimated realm in which the condition of man was represented, idealized, and indicted. Higher culture becomes part of the material culture. In this transformation, it loses the greater part of its truth. (*One–Dimensional* 58)

With the materialization of a society's ideals, ideals themselves are transferred from an abstract plane of thought and spirit into the tangible world; or as discussed earlier, exist as reified nostalgia. Perhaps we can consider this the logical result of Marxist dialectical materialism (even if it was not what Marx hoped for): the dominance of the new proletariat, the consumer (Russell, 759). In any event, the materialization of ideals is a process directly facilitated by the rise of the consumer culture. Politics, or the enactment of ideals in the process of organizing culture, is subsumed within the economic, or material life of a society. So in a system where dialectical tension between two established poles is replaced by the white noise of abstraction and the fragmentation of the body politic into a profusion of commerical alternatives and the equivalencies of capital, what are the possibilities for dissent? As the Aspen technique shows, there can be limited conflicts with the established system, but ones where victory is at best provisional. Thompson's race for Sheriff is the result of what Marcuse would label as "negative" thinking. In the suspension between cynicism and idealism, with no real expectation of change, but hope all the same, Thompson becomes a negative thinker, or conscientious objector to society itself.[17] Marcuse counsels that

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[17] "The critical theory of society possesses no concepts which could bridge the gap between the present and its future; holding no promise and showing no success, it remains negative. Thus it wants to remain loyal to those who, without hope, have given and give their life to the Great Refusal." (*One–Dimensional* 257)

the only way to forcibly make such a system self–aware of its own limitations is by abandoning it; if late capitalism suddenly finds its most important constituents (consumers, not citizens) leaving in droves, then it will necessarily search for a new equilibrium.

Marcuse introduces the possibility of just such a revolt with his idea of the Great Refusal, which anticipated the more popular questioning of consumerist values inherent in the counterculture (and even later, the flight of counterculture radicals to rural and communal living after the failure of coalition politics). However, in his signature work *One–Dimensional Man*, Marcuse outlines the Great Refusal as an artistic movement rejecting the values of mass society rather than as a consumer's revolt in the face of their own commodification. Whatever his intentions, the Great Refusal became the intellectual justification for those of the drop–out culture who aspired to more than just Timothy Leary's mantra. As Marcuse puts it:

> Whether ritualized or not, art contains the rationality of negation. In its advanced positions, it is the Great Refusal—the protest against that which is. The modes in which man and things are made to appear, to sing and sound and speak, are modes of refuting, breaking and recreating their factual existence. But these modes of negation pay tribute to the antagonistic society to which they are linked. Separated from the sphere of labour where society reproduces itself and its misery, the world of art which they create remains, with all its truth, a privilege and an illusion...
>
> Now this essential gap between the arts and the order of the day, kept open in the artistic alienation, is progressively closed by the advancing technological society. And with its closing, the Great Refusal is in turn refused; the "other dimension" is absorbed into the prevailing state of affairs. The works of alienation are themselves incorporated into this society and circulate as part and parcel of the equipment which adorns and psychoanalyzes the prevailing state of affairs. Thus they become commercials—they sell, comfort, or excite. (*One–Dimensional Man*, 63–64)

A key concept in Marcuse's emphasis on the artist in the Great Refusal comes dressed

in Freudian clothes. Marcuse sees artistic achievement as based in experimental perspectives afforded by sublimation. When a piece of art challenges its viewers to perceive their surroundings in a new way, by making the familiar strange, it triggers a process of not–necessarily conscious reflection. The assumption, of course, is that reflection *on* and new knowledge *about* oneself and the conditions one lives within is beneficial. The benefits of sublimation are then fairly self–evident, invoking as well beneficial assessments of self–knowledge, measured thought and intellectual engagement with one's surroundings and place within them.

> Artistic alienation is sublimation. It creates the images of conditions which are irreconcilable with the established Reality Principle but which, as cultural images, become tolerable, even edifying and useful. Now this imagery is invalidated. Its incorporation into the kitchen, the office, the shop; its commercial release for business and fun is, in a sense, desublimation—replacing mediated by immediate gratification. (*One–Dimensional* 72)

If desublimation is the handmaiden of faltering dialectical thought, then Thompson provides a political corollary to the artists Marcuse considers. In Joe Edwards' Aspen race for mayor, one of his core constituencies was the "Head" vote; Thompson and Edwards' other organizers knew their only hopes of success rode upon mobilizing the relatively high numbers of counterculture radicals who had settled in the Aspen area—which was at the time, relatively isolated from the mainstream of American life. Chronicling the resistance put up by the incumbents, Thompson recounts:

> So most of the freaks felt that voting wasn't worth the kind of bullshit that went with it, and the mayor's illegal threats only reinforced their notion that politics in America was something to be avoided. Getting busted for grass was one thing, because the "crime" was worth the risk . . . but they saw no sense in going to court for a "political technicality," even if they weren't guilty.
>
> (This sense of "reality" is a hallmark of the Drug Culture, which values the Instant Reward—a pleasant four–hour high—over anything involving a time

> lag between the Effort and the End. On this scale of values, politics is too difficult, too "complex" and too "abstract" to justify any risk or initial action. It is the flip side of the "Good German" syndrome.) (*Shark* 156)

The "Good German syndrome" Thompson refers to here is the tacit acceptance by the "silent majority" of totalitarian tendencies in American society. While on the surface, the typical countercultural dissenter may have seemed free of this syndrome, their inaction and for all practical effect submission to what Thompson imputes to be totalitarian hegemony reveal a different set of symptoms that point to the same malaise. Invoking the spectre of Nazi Germany as a trope for a similar concentration of power in America occurs throughout Thompson's work; in his letters, his columns, even in describing one of the many casinos populating *F&LLV*: "The Circus–Circus is what the whole hep world would be doing on Saturday night if the Nazis had won the war. This is the Sixth Reich" (46). A society that can contain its own contradictions is a society stripped of its dynamism, relying instead on reified spectacle to obscure its own rigidity (for example, the Nuremberg Rallies in Germany and neon excess of Las Vegas). While fascism mastered its own contradictions through terroristic policies that intimidated the opposition into silence and thus irrelevancy, the American strain of totalitarianism that Thompson militates against is rooted in what Marcuse calls technics: "a universe of instrumentalities, may increase the weakness as well as the power of man. At the present stage, he is perhaps more powerless over his own apparatus than he ever was before" (235). The apparatus, then, in both cases works towards similar ends. Both terror and technics condition subjectivity. Instead of regarding themselves as political subjects, the "Germans" and

"Americans" envisioned here are compelled by their powerlessness in the face of social organization—the apparatus—to turn inward, to more individualized identities as subjects of fear or subjects of pleasure.

The perils of technics are different than those of terror; the brute realities of fear and coercion are nowhere near as subtle and entrenched as the seduction of consumption. The immediate gratification inherent in the Drug Culture, the shift from mind expansion to mind numbing signalled the deterioration of what had once been a potent force for cultural change. And so the Great Refusal, the principled rejection of one–dimensional life, became Drop–Out Culture. Desublimation acts as both the corollary of consumer culture and the cause and effect of commodification. The endless present of immediate gratification combined with the devaluation of reflection and critical distance telescoped any attempts at encouraging social perspective and turned them inward, into the myopic moment of hedonistic disregard for anything but the self. With their perspective thus reoriented, members of the counterculture glided past sustained, pointed social criticism in favour of murmured platitudes and easy sentiment. By dropping out, they removed themselves as a force for change and so mutely accepted the hegemony of the System they so despised. Thompson's mantra of Fear and Loathing might very well be an exhortation to awareness among his countercultural fellows: to recognize their seduction as the obverse of coercion and in this visceral reaction against totalizing elements admit to and confront their own tendencies towards collaboration as "Good Germans." Marcuse's Great Refusal—originally intended to be a reaction against the desublimation of

culture—became in the Drop Out culture the wholesale capitulation of individuals to desublimation. Whether their continued presence within the false dialectic of advanced industrial society could have changed the historical course charted by technological rationality is a moot point. The idea of positive change was exchanged for what Frankfurt scholars like Marcuse and Theodor Adorno identified as negative critique—called such because of its critical insight matched only by its failure to provide a positive programme for change (a change though, that would have to find a solution outside the continuum of Western thought while steeped in it). The fact that society had mastered its own contradictions and thus made impervious to criticism—rendering criticism a theoretical function rather than practical exercise—meant that the Great Refusal was from the start marked by a lack of instrumentality as it became a (desublimated) end to itself rather than position from which a new Great Acceptance could be conceived and articulated.

> Somewhere in the nightmare of failure that gripped American between 1965 and 1970, the old Berkeley–born notion of beating The System by fighting it gave way to a sort of numb conviction that it made more sense in the long run to Flee, or even simply to hide, than to fight the bastards on anything vaguely resembling their own terms. (*Shark* 155)

The decision to Flee reflects Blau's concept of the post– modern double bind: that power can theorized, but not contained. Jean Francois Lyotard adds a similar concept—that of motricity—to the fray (144). A culture based upon technological rationality (or technics) is to Marcuse fundamentally irrational, as the divorce of apparatus from the human hands which fashioned it create a fundamentally alienated existence. Motricity further ruptures the split by imbuing the apparatus with its own

inhuman energy, much like Blau's (*vis à vis* Foucault) concept of power or deMan's description of irony: a force which—once humanity becomes aware of its presence—we cannot help but to obsessively return to. "It can know this inauthenticity but can never overcome it. It can only restate and repeat it on an increasingly conscious level, but it remains endlessly caught in the impossibility of making this knowledge applicable to the empirical world" (222). Motricity, then, exists in a sphere seemingly autonomous to human agency—which the processes of motricity have ensured has been reduced to the agency of the individual (as opposed to broad and lasting coalitions). However, unlike the classical definition of fate, which motricity seems to have much in common with, this category of autonomous force is a byproduct of human institutions rather than divine intervention.

The double bind that Thompson finds himself trapped within is his frustrated awareness of the impossibility of opposition within a totalitarian society. However, Thompson in particular and the counterculture in general, are obsessed with making their theories of opposition applicable to the empirical world of the totalitarian state—the "Establishment." The urgent need to flee in the face of the faceless motricity of the state apparatus ends up confounding their marginalization, as their awareness of their marginalized status ensures they cannot conceive of their relationship with the apparatus as anything other than marginality; a singular self–reflexive obsession that mimics the endless spiral of irony. The desire to escape conditions of subjection in order to assert subjectivity construct this endlessness as a temporal void, where escape is always–already implicated in reproducing the conditions that prompted the

necessity for it. By the end of *One–Dimensional Man*, Marcuse's promising initial outline of the Great Refusal suffers from just such an infection: "In the totalitarian society, the human attitudes tend to become escapist attitudes, to follow Samuel Beckett's advice: 'Don't wait to be hunted to hide...'" (243).

Chapter 3: Gonzo: From Negative Critique to Simulation

> Power itself has for a long time produced nothing but the signs of its resemblance. And at the same time, another figure of power comes into play: that of a collective demand for *signs* of power—a holy union that is reconstructed around its disappearance. The whole world adheres to it more or less in terror of the collapse of the political. And in the end the game of power becomes nothing but the *critical* obsession with power—obsession with its death, obsession with its survival, which increases as it disappears. When it has totally disappeared, we will logically be under the total hallucination of power—a haunting memory that is already in evidence everywhere, expressing at once the compulsion to get rid of it (no one wants it anymore, everyone unloads it on everyone else) and the panicked nostalgia over its loss. The melancholy of societies without power: this has already stirred up fascism, that overdose of a strong referential in a society that cannot terminate its mourning. (*Simulacra* 23)

Once again, I will commence a chapter with a discussion of a certain double bind inherent in power. However, in this case, the formulation of power Jean Baudrillard posits above diverges significantly from previous incarnations. Reviving the simulacra from Platonic thought, Baudrillard works through a set of concerns that can only be called postmodern (an allegiance, however, which he coyly disavows). Where Frederic Jameson provides the context for thinking about the Sixties as a site symptomatic of the double bind through which history is confused with its nostalgic reification, Herbert Marcuse emphasizes the compromised position of social critique, which is always already muted by the ability of a one–dimensional society to contain its own contradictions. Hence Beckett's pessimistic indictment at the end of the previous chapter—that one day, unavoidably, inevitably, you will (we all will) be hunted. So, how does Baudrillard's tracing through of the double bind reflect another way of reading

Thompson? I believe that Baudrillard's assertion that the simulacrum (form always already evacuated of content) can uncannily be both aware of itself as such and yethaunted by the nostalgic hallucinations of its own inviolability provides a paradoxical frame perfectly suited to the vagaries of Gonzo, whose aesthetic could very well be summed up as: resistance through replication.

If Jameson makes a distinction between the "good faith" periodization (which depends on theoretical commitment to understanding history) and the false consciousness of "bad" periodization (which cannot see past its constitutive status as nostalgia), then he has provided us with the critical vantage point from which we can see the ways in which Thompson's work both strives towards and sinks into both kinds of periodization, always and at the same time resisting the foreclosure of the one by the other. Similarly, if Marcuse's iteration of the double bind—the all–encompassing nature of one–dimensionality which forecloses oppositionality—is by necessity inseparable from the disease of technological rationality itself, then Thompson's Gonzo innovations allow us to read texts such as *F&LLV* as examples of what Marcuse would characterize as negative critique. However, Gonzo–as–negative–critique reveals the contiguous structure of the double bind: with every attempt to extricate itself from society long enough to pass judgement, Gonzo implicates itself in the very processes it hopes to critique. And so Thompson falls prey to romanticization and nostalgia in the course of trying to break through them. As such, the way in which Thompson's Gonzo antics function as a negative critique (which both replicates and resists the process of nostalgic reification) anticipates Baudrillard's model of the simulacra: "When the real is

no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning" (*Simulacra* 6).

What are you doing after the orgy?

In Baudrillard's *America*, the possibility of challenge, a continuation of the negative thinking that Marcuse and Adorno so cherished, finds its expression in the sinuous structure of the simulacrum. Sinuous because it cleaves to the object of emulation, leaving only the startled moments of perception to realize it is not of its landscape: the shifting of the rifleman in the camouflage vest catches the deer's eye at the last moment. The simulacrum is the structure of oppression; simulation is the process of enslavement. But the awareness of such can be emancipatory. And this awareness for Baudrillard marks a progression beyond the paralysis of reflexivity Marcuse and deMan cannot surpass. Baudrillard takes as his starting point the vanishing point: that one–dimensional society is a given.

Consider the screen impassively confronting Dorothy and her companions as they seek audience with the eponymous figure of the *Wizard of Oz* (America's fever dream of itself). Beyond is the vortex, the sublimity of experience lies beyond the drape. Or so it presents itself. It is in fact a simulation of such frontiers, behind it lies only the Wizard, who himself is only a man, an infinite regression and play of images, the sudden movements cycling endlessly in a hall of mirrors. The wizard knows this of course, the gears and levers he pulls are the manipulations of the simulacrum; wielding power through a semblance of power. Where one ends and the other begins is perhaps the most pressing question of post–modernity (which itself is experienced

only on the plane where it touches modernity—the "post" aspect of it refuses to meet our gaze directly, flitting around and only apprehendable as peripheral vision).

The simulacrum overcomes the double bind through its own infinite replication of it. Or rather: awareness of its simulated nature allows the simulacrum (or those trapped within it) to turn replication into resistance. Baudrillard agrees with Marcuse's argument that advanced industrial society has succeeded in materializing its ideals. However, Baudrillard contends that this materialization is the realization of a utopia. A utopia achieved though, cannot help but ask the question: what of "ever after?"

> On the aromatic hillsides of Santa Barbara, the villas are all like funeral homes. Between the gardenias and the eucalyptus trees, among the profusion of plant genuses and the monotony of the human species, lies the tragedy of a utopian dream made reality. In the very heartland of wealth and liberation, you always hear the same question: "What are you doing after the orgy?" What do you do when everything is available—sex, flowers, the stereotypes of life and death? This is America's problem and, through America, it has become the whole world's problem. (*America* 30)

The utopian secret for Baudrillard, is that the achievement of utopia represents the end of history. The fulfillment of modernity's dreams may efface history—a concept that he attributes to a "European" (as opposed to "American") way of thinking—but they can never leave modernism itself behind. Thus the utopia occurs as a temporally null event. As such, the seeming contradiction of post–modern, anti–utopian strains simultaneously manifesting themselves along with the realization of utopias becomes a paradox—what Baudrillard considers the post–modern condition.[1] "*Utopia has been*

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[1] A few words must be said on Baudrillard and the post–modern. In the works examined here, Baudrillard is very careful to avoid mention of the post–modern. Instead, he sidesteps that particular debate by effecting a comparison between "Europeans" and "Americans" as pre–moderns and moderns. To emphasize certain modern traits—which is, of course, the subject of interest for him in a book titled

achieved here and anti-utopia is being achieved" (*America* 97).

In what way are Thompson's works as examples of ultramodernity? ? To begin, I would like to briefly return to the Aspen technique, and rather than read it as an claustrophobic expression of captivity with America's contradictions, consider instead the ways that it manipulates the double bind of power. To begin, I would like to briefly return to the Aspen technique and (rather than read it as an claustrophobic expression of captivity with America's contradictions) the ways in which it manipulates the double bind of power. From there, I will investigate the play of intensities in Thompson's dystopic depiction of Las Vegas, an approach that will be aided by Baudrillard's own reaction to Las Vegas and by an architectural study of it—*Learning from Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. Finally, I will examine the "confusion of effects" upon which the rhetoric of Gonzo depends. This strategy reveals Thompson's awareness of the simulated nature of the Gonzo aesthetic (if I can call it that) and his embrace of simulation: resistance through replication.

Back to Aspen

Within Thompson's bid for political office, what sort of similarities to his writings are evident? Freak Power, or Gonzo politics, utilized the same wild embellishment and hyperbole which characterized Thompson's reportage. Based upon his platform (examined in the previous chapter) his crusade against land development

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"America"—he deploys the term ultramodern, thus effacing the post–modern by turning the debate over the relationship of the different modernisms from that of succession to one of intensities.

and emphasis on drugs stand out as the sites of greatest intensity. By combining the traditional with the carnivalesque, Thompson's campaign stood on its own merit—and at the same time undercut its own legitimacy. While a debate on development is common within the framework of local politics, Thompson's stand against it represented more than a worried citizen concerned about the everyday impact of tract housing built down the road. His opposition was keyed to "create a town where people could live like human beings, instead of slaves to some bogus sense of Progress that is driving us mad" (*Shark* 160). His espousal of the drug culture was a canny political move designed to draw in a disinterested portion of the electorate and also to ensure he *would not* win. His goal was to change the structure of Aspen's politics: "The Old Guard was doomed, the liberals were terrorized and the Underground had emerged, with a terrible suddenness, on a very serious power trip" (*Shark* 160). Thompson's skepticism of the efficacy of political power is evident in the description he uses here. The power trip is little different than the drug trip he is so fond of. Perceptions are altered and can be changed for the greater good, but the reality of a Freak Power candidate in office is unlikely to change the objective situation of Aspen politics. When Thompson ran for Sheriff, riding the groundswell generated by Edwards' run for mayor, the possibility that he would actually win saw him moderate his position, promising that in the event of victory, he would act as an ombudsman only and hire a more qualified sheriff (Perry 144). Power for power's sake held little interest for Thompson. The power he stood to gain from his adventure in politics was not the actual power of the office of sheriff, but the simulation of it: the *threat* that his

popular campaign consisted of meant there was a political will fundamentally alien to Aspen's Establishment. "There was a definite satisfaction in knowing that, even if we lost, whoever beat us would never get rid of the scars. It was necessary, we felt, to thoroughly terrify our opponents, so that even in a hollow victory, they would learn to fear every sunrise until the next election" (169). So does "Freak Power in the Rockies" operate as the ultimate insider's account or as the self–aggrandizing propaganda of a political candidate with access to what amounts to free advertising? The answer is crucial, because the ways in which Thompson troubles the distinction between subjectivity and objectivity in the Aspen elections mark a broader trend within his not only his work, but within America itself:

> The possibility of victory can be a heavy millstone around the neck of any political candidate who might prefer, in his heart, to spend his main energies on a series of terrifying, whiplash assaults on everything the voters hold dear.... The candidate first creates an impossible psychic maze, then he drags the voters into it and flails them constantly with gibberish and rude shocks....
>
> It doesn't work, but it's fun . . . unlike the coin's other new face that emerged in the presidential campaign of Gene McCarthy and Bobby Kennedy in 1968. In both cases, we saw establishment candidates claiming conversion to some newer and younger state of mind (or political reality) that would make them more in tune with a newer, younger and weirder electorate that had previously called them both useless.
>
> And it worked. Both conversions were hugely successful, for a while . . . and if the tactic itself seemed cynical, it is still hard to know, in either case, whether the tactic was father to the conversion, or vice–versa. Which hardly matters, for now (*Shark* 162).

Here, Thompson cannot make up his mind if embracing the youth vote was a pragmatic or idealistic gesture on the part of the Democrats. Why would the specifics of conversion *not* matter? Perhaps because this political decision reflects the macrocosm—and it is the dynamics of this reflection which call for further

investigation.

Baudrillard first uses the relation between map and territory to explain his concept of simulation, that the relation between the two is one of "ideal coextensivity" (2). What is the ideal coextensivity at work here in the religiously–tinged language of conversion versus the expediency of political tactics. Can we even speak of the ideal here? Thompson implies that we cannot, and so we are left with *material* coextensivities. The same objective result is reached, regardless of the politicians' motivations. But, since we are put into the position of questioning the politician's motivations, the model becomes one of dissimulation, a close corollary to dissembling (a time–honoured political practice) on the one hand, and on the other, the anti–utopian possibilities of the simulacrum.

> Representation stems from the principle of the equivalence of the sign and of the real (even if this equivalence is utopian, it is a fundamental axiom). Simulation, on the contrary, stems from the utopia of the principle of equivalence, from the radical negation of the sign as value, from the sign as reversion and death sentence of every reference. Whereas representation attempts to absorb simulation by interpreting it as a false representation, simulation envelops the whole edifice of representation itself as a simulacrum. (6)

So, while simulation springs out of the head of representation's utopia, the operation of simulation introduces entropic forces—what Baudrillard coins as hysteresis[2]—which break the utopian equivalencies of the sign down into dystopic

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[2]"Hysteresis: the process whereby something continues to develop by inertia, whereby an effect persists even when its cause has disappeared." (115) Baudrillard's coinage has much in common with Lyotard's motricity—the autonomous force of the apparatus that seems to act independently of human design. Thompson himself suffers from what we could consider hysteresis. Indeed, one could argue that Thompson's life as a producer of texts has entered a stage where each new publication seems marred by entrophic forces. Since 1979's *The Great Shark Hunt*, Thompson has published one

zones. By the same token, the political embrace of a "newer and younger state of mind" justifies itself by the utopian implication that the youthful counterculture is onto something and that their demands can redefine the country. However, it betrays this justification by the inevitable result—which Thompson defers and resists ("Which hardly matters, for now"). The youth vote will (and did) become just another voting bloc (and even then, a bloc in demographic terms only, as both Democrats and Republicans can boast of sizable youth wings). This inevitable decay in intention is expected by Thompson (earlier in the article, he describes the Freak Power movement as a "one–shot coalition"), his deferral is grounded in the recognition of America's one–dimensionality, that no matter what, the System will prevail. While in the Aspen race, Thompson was able to cleanly target his opponents (such as incumbents and reactionary community members, like the Elks), the easy answers of local politics hold little relation to the forces at the national level which defeated the counterculture. "Greedheads" and "land–rapers" does not quite cut it at the national level, so Thompson had to use newer, bigger rhetoric: hence his attraction/repulsion to Richard Nixon and on a metaphorical level, the atavistic wilderness of Las Vegas.

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novel (*The Curse of Lono*) and three more volumes in the Gonzo papers series (anthologized collections of his newspaper and magazine columns). Critics have noted a deterioration in the quality of each successive collection, as Thompson often reverts to stereotypical Gonzo behaviour. Whatever the case, there is nothing in nearly two decades of Thompson's written output to match his "one–issue" works (*Hell's Angels* and *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail*) and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. His most recent publications, *The Proud Highway* (his letters dating from 1955–1967) and 1997's *The Rum Diary* consist of work that was in the main completed during his productive period of the Sixties and Seventies.

Forward to Vegas

In order to better understand the new urban forms emerging in America, architectural experts Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour conducted a studio seminar at the Yale School of Art and Architecture in 1968 (Venturi xi) which led to the text entitled *Learning from Las Vegas: the Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form*. Among the first notes made about Las Vegas compare it to Rome, concluding that:

> Each city is an archetype rather than a prototype, an exaggerated example from which to derive lessons for the typical. Each city vividly superimposes elements of a supranational scale on the local fabric: churches in the religious capital, casinos and their signs in the entertainment capital. These cause violent juxtapositions of use and scale in both cities (18).

To suggest that Las Vegas is an archetypal city is to imbue with dreamlike qualities, perhaps suggesting that Las Vegas is a dream a darkly slumbering America has of itself. We certainly cannot deny the allure Las Vegas holds over the insomniac Thompson and the tourist Baudrillard. Earlier I described Oz as a fever–dream America has of itself; that appellation seems appropriate when speaking of Las Vegas. Like a fever that has to run its course, Las Vegas resists attempts to anesthetize its contradictions out of existence. "No, this is not a good town for psychedelic drugs. Reality itself is too twisted," Thompson's alter ego Duke relates, as he stumbles through the garish gates of Circus–Circus, completely twisted himself on ether (47). Probably the most basic of the "violent juxtapositions" hinted at above is the very (questionable) structure of reality itself.

> America is neither dream nor reality. It is a hyperreality because it is a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved.

> Everything here is real and pragmatic, and yet it is all the stuff of dreams too. It may be that the truth of America can only be seen by a European, since he alone will discover here the perfect simulacrum—that of immanence and material transcription of all values. The Americans, for their part, have no sense of simulation. They are themselves simulation in its most developed state, but they have no language in which to describe it, since they themselves are the model. (Baudrillard *Simulacra* 28–29)

Earlier on in this thesis, I spoke of the relationship between the System and its nodal points, wherein the ineffable System can only be confronted indirectly through its nodal manifestations. So it is with simulation, an expression of the System whose elusiveness postmodernity takes as its first tenet. For example, consider Fitzgerald's classic, which though a modern text, anticipates the post–modern in many of its trappings. Jay Gatsby's tragic pursuit of Daisy illustrates that the operation of the American Dream itself is intrinsically rooted in periodization. It is a simulacrum, an overriding cultural fantasy whose nostalgic desire for a "return" ("somewhere back in that vast obscurity") hides the imaginary status of this idealized origin. Gatsby's fetishization of Daisy represents the double bind that also troubles Thompson. The System is unapproachable except via its nodal manifestations; any attempt to project the whole of the System onto its nodal manifestation dooms the nodal point (or at least the signification invested in it) to collapse under its own weight. Because of this same sort of overdetermination, Thompson labels his experiment in Gonzo journalism a failure ("Jacket Copy"), but is perhaps overly modest in his findings. For one of his textual tactics that characterize *F&LLV* and his Gonzo writings as a whole is the avoidance of such an overload through applying a different sort of pressure. In the confusion of effects that follows from his rushed meditations on drugs, music, pop

culture, and driving[3] (among other things) Thompson leaps from one incidence of overdetermination or fetishization to another with dizzying speed (an approach which Baudrillard is often castigated for, especially in his touristy ruminations about America). The result is that the imminent implosion never quite happens; the frenetic pace keeps him just ahead of total collapse. However, as much as Thompson's deployment of this confusion of effects can be read as a form of resistance, the venue for it—Las Vegas itself—is the epicentre of replication itself. Thompson's Gonzo exploits are thus made all the more stunning, either for his flirtation with imminent disaster or for the incredible cynicism evident in his exploitation of a framework he knows he will be inevitably co–opted into.

The Confusion of Effects

As *Learning from Las Vegas* points out, the inner sanctum of Las Vegas—the casinos—deploys a confusion of effects, the proliferation of which is ascribed to the cynical intent to disorient gamblers. By removing any vestige of stability from which to assess the dynamic flow of capital, the casinos immerse their customers within so many systems of equivalencies that they draw the gamblers' attention away from the hemophiliac flow of money (further abstracted by its presentation as plastic chips):

> The gambling room is always very dark; the patio, always very bright. But both

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3 "Well good god!" he said. "You just backed over that two foot concrete abutment and you didn't even slow down! Forty–five in reverse! And you barely missed the pump!"

"No harm done," I said. "I always test a transmission that way. The rear end. For stress factors." (*F&LLV* 13)

> are enclosed: The former has no windows, and the latter is open only to the sky. The combination of darkness and enclosure of the gambling room and its subspaces makes for privacy, protection, concentration and control. The intricate maze under the low ceiling never connects with outside light or outside space. This disorients the occupant in space and time. One loses track of where one is and when it is. Time is limitless, because the light of noon and midnight are exactly the same. Space is limitless, because the artificial light obscures rather than defines its boundaries. Light is not used to define space. Walls and ceilings do not serve as reflective surfaces for light, but are made absorbent and dark. Space is enclosed, but limitless, because its edges are dark (Venturi 49).

To the radical uncertainty within the casinos is added a similar murkiness outside. Driving into Las Vegas, tourists must ask themselves: "Is the sign the building or the building the sign?" (Venturi 74).

> Signs in Las Vegas use mixed media—words, pictures, and sculpture—to persuade and inform. A sign is, contradictorily, for day and night. The same sign works as polychrome sculpture in the sun and as black silhouette against the sun; at night it is a source of light. It revolves by day and becomes a play of lights at night.... Buildings are also signs. At night on Fremont Street, whole buildings are illuminated but not through reflection from spotlights; they are made into sources of light by closely spaced neon tubes. (52)

In both cases, the confusion of effects problematizes simple distinctions like inside/outside and by doing so masks the operation of simulation through the sheer proliferation of effects. Thompson mobilizes/suffers from a similar confusion of effects. In the first half of *F&LLV* (the Fear section), Vegas takes on a timeless quality. The old distinction between day and night are obliterated by the deathless neon signage, traditional patterns of settlement are refuted by a self–imposed oasis rearing itself out of the surrounding desert. The obsessive quality that Thompson chronicles adds to the unreality of the atmosphere; the compulsive gamblers tugging on the slots again and again, or the "caricatures of used–car dealers from Dallas... still screaming

around these desert–city crap tables at four thirty on a Sunday morning. Still humping the American Dream, that vision of the Big Winner somehow emerging from the last–minute pre–dawn chaos of a stale Vegas casino."[4] (57) Time is measured in terms of results; the clock's hands strike not one or two, but win or lose. Even Taylorism, the cornerstone of American productive success and thus of wealth and the material promises of the American Dream holds no sway here. The regimented organization of time into the work week loses its grip; the bettors gamble on, unaware or uncaring of the beginning of the work week only hours away. Vegas imposes no unity upon its momentary denizens. Instead, the only link is in empty, isolated gestures which have forgotten the motivations that prompted them in the first place.

However, Duke's paranoid vision of a world caught in a whirlpool of constant flux crystallizes into a recognition that behind the boundless energy of flux itself, the energy that Las Vegas feeds off is ultimately locatable beyond the isolated context of Las Vegas itself. Rather, this feverish commotion is a mutated form of the vitality that infused America itself during the Fifties—the apex of the post–war period for American power and self–assurance. "It was clear that we had stumbled into a prehistoric gathering," declares Duke, aghast at the potent *ressentiment* simmering within the attendees at the District Attorney's Conference on Drugs who only tacitly acknowledge that the sixties as a cultural phenomenon occurred at all: "A week in

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[4] Duke's advice to the desperate gamblers portrayed here is to "Calm down. Learn to *enjoy* losing" (57). Eager to cash in on the air of success cultivated by Las Vegas in its celebration of American hegemony, these "caricatures" forget that failure is the shadow which follows the American Dream, that those who do attain success often do so by capitalizing on P.T. Barnum's dictate that there's a sucker born every minute.

Vegas is like stumbling into a Time Warp, a regression to the late fifties" (138;156). Mired in the objective framework of the Fifties, Las Vegas represents a freeze frame of American culture at its self–declared peak, an ossified relic whose rigidity is poignantly signified by the products of a nearby national park—the Petrified Forest.

> Nobody had *learned* anything—or at least nothing new. Except maybe me . . . And all I learned was that the National District Attorneys' Association is about ten years behind the grim truth and harsh kinetic realities of what they have only just recently learned to call "the Drug culture" in this foul year of Our Lord, 1971. (201)

In Thompson's manic conception of America, Las Vegas holds a special place. It operates as a temporal *null zone*, where *different periods exist side by side as spatial* co–ordinates rather than as linear points in a temporal model. Referring back to Jameson, the objective limits of the period no longer apply. Las Vegas repels this *notion of limits in the same way one magnet repels another; indicating* that America's neon capital is subject to laws particularly its own. And what makes Vegas particularly fascinating to Thompson is that in its fixed embrace of the Fifties, the Sixties never seemed to "happen" to it. So, *in* "laying a Sixties trip" on Las Vegas, Thompson both replicates and resists the artifice of simulacra, a double–edged movement. His wild behaviour and pharmaceutical excess on the Strip is a logical extension of ethic of consumption which defines Las Vegas. However, *his internalization of this* ethic simultaneously manifests itself as not the *satisfaction* which results from consuming, but as the crude voraciousness of hunger itself.

His use of drugs in this "Sixties trip" show how simulated behaviour (because in a post–modern world there is no other kind, only degrees of simulation) resists and

replicates the brute fact of its status as simulacra. Being high is the clearest demarcation between Duke and Gonzo and the other denizens of Vegas. Drug use assures that they will be outsiders above all else in their interaction with the city. But, on the other hand, drug use—though outlawed[5]—is also the logical extension of the rampant consumption ethic at work in Vegas. "Reality itself is too twisted." The particular incarnation of the American Dream which waylaid Gatsby and seduced much of post–war American culture is predicated upon certain economic assumptions. Your stuff shall set you free. The language of freedom, liberty and democracy which the Dream is usually couched in, obscure the fact that in a "utopian" America which has realized the materialization of its ideals, these abstract terms have no value as such. Recall Baudrillard: "The Americans, for their part, have no sense of simulation. They are themselves simulation in its most developed state, but they have no language in which to describe it, since they themselves are the model" (29). The American Dream, then, is still described in an outmoded language because any other would have to accept that the materialization of ideals is concomitant with their nostalgic reification.

As such, among the confusion of effects I have described above is this very ethic of consumption. Because of its consumerist underpinnings, participation in American society has reached its apex through the act of consumption itself. Political activism is one of many such ideals which has been supplanted by their materialization; a process

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[5] Recall the sign marking Thompson's entrance into Vegas:
"Don't Gamble with Marijuana!
In Nevada: Possession—20 Years!
Sale—Life!" (42)

which, in consumer society, is exemplified by commodification or the reduction of everything to series of equivalencies.[6] In fact, economic consumption has become constitutive of the political subject. Generally speaking, economic equality precedes political equality; the discrepancies inherent in the political power structure are smoothed over through the ability of people in different classes to own the same things. The degree of drug intake in Thompson's work and his construction of it as central to his writerly persona reflects this economic evolution; the consumption ethic runs rampant and in the end threatens to consume even Thompson himself. The dangerous line that both Duke and Dr. Gonzo walk in their bouts of drug–taking leads each character to a moment of overdose, whether Dr. Gonzo's paralyzing attack of Fear in the Circus–Circus casino or Duke's ventures in cannibalism—getting high from adrenochrome, found only in "the adrenaline glands from a *living* human body" (47; 132). In both cases, overdose serves as an analogue to hyperconsumption, the fascination with materiality which is constitutive of capitalism's subjects is turned into a dangerous fetishization of the act of consumption itself. Overdose signals the point where Gonzo reaches its own limits. Because of this fascination with the *gesture* of consumption—the primacy of form over content—Thompson is sucked into his own work as a disintegrating narrator. At points in the text an editor has to step in to piece

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[6] Consider the recent advances in genetic engineering and the current debates over cloning and the use of human embryos. Traditionally, the worth of a human has always been calculated as a precisely non–material cost. There was no way to reduce the value of a human life into the system of equivalencies mentioned above. But these innovations indicate that we are moving towards a period where it will be possible to substitute a human life for a dollar value.

together Duke's incoherent account, in one instance depending on the transcribed dialogue of a tape Duke made of events he was too shattered to assimilate and disseminate (161–168). This metaphysical collapse mirrors a physical one. The overdose from the adrenochrome ("You took too *much*!") is the end result of hyperconsumption. Of course, the result is what happens when the body tries to ingest too much and can assimilate too little: the presence of a foreign substance threatens the autonomy (and life) of the subject. The overdose then, is metaphysical shorthand for the onset of a certain malaise affecting American subjects who search for meaning in ever–intensifying engagements with materialism: seeking to banish its shortfalls and disappointments through more and more and more...

Baudrillard's concept of simulation is valuable in examining the way in which Gonzo journalism depends on paradox and juxtaposition in its simultaneous tracing–through of resistance and replication. While Marcuse's negative critique identifies a certain paralysis of will unavoidable in a one–dimensional society which is capable of containing its contradictions (through the materialization of its ideals), awareness of the simulated nature of American pop culture allows Thompson to turn the paralysis of a one–dimensional society back upon itself. By embracing this paralysis and holding it close (though his grasp is not as amorphous as the embrace which one–dimensional society stifles oppositionality with), Thompson creates the conditions for his dissent through his very acquiescence. The measure of Gonzo success then, is to be found in the degree to which it insinuates itself as a copy of the simulation (copy of a copy) and yet, never quite manages to become a flawless

facsimile. These (sometimes subtle; sometimes not) divergences from the "original" reveal the key to simulation: that what Gonzo is in fact "simulating" is a process not yet hardened by its own nostalgic reification. It is in the gaps which exist between process and product where Thompson roams, invoking any number of replications which never quite reach completion, and which—in their very profusion—create a confusion of effects which both reveal and obscure Gonzo's central "truth": there are no copies, only copying. Because of this fundamental provisionality, resistance is possible only from the interstitial space between nodal points rather than the nodes themselves, which have coagulated from process into product. Baudrillard emphasizes this provisionality in his vision of America:

> [Y]ou must accept everything at once, because it is this telescoping that gives the American way of life its illuminating, exhilarating side, just as, in the desert, everything contributes to the magic of the desert. If you approach this society with the nuances of moral, aesthetic, or critical judgement, you will miss its originality, which comes precisely from its defying judgement and pulling off a prodigious confusion of effects. To side-step that confusion and excess is simply to evade the challenge it throws down to you. The violence of its contrasts, the absence of discrimination between positive and negative effects, the telescoping of races, technologies, and models, the waltz of simulacra and images here is such that, as with dream elements, you must accept the way they follow one another, even if it seems unintelligible; you must come to see this whirl of things and events as an irresistible, fundamental datum. (*America* 67)

A Final Note on Hunter S. Thompson: Tracing the Hermeneutic Circle

In organizing some final thoughts on Hunter S. Thompson, I would like to return to Alan Rinzler's intriguing comment: "Maybe what puzzles me the most is why he has no insight into himself, and doesn't look at himself very deeply" (Whitmer 297). I share Rinzler's puzzlement, and over the course of this thesis have tried to work through this curious case of blindness. For the most part, I have tried to avoid a biographical exegesis; the personal circumstances that will reveal to us why Thompson as an individual falls short in self-awareness. This presupposes access to Thompson's soul, exactly the sort of essentialism which plagues history in the form of reified nostalgia. Ultimately, all I can work with are Thompson's texts and documented behaviour. That I treat him as "a text" is attributable not to speculation as to his personal beliefs and aims, but instead to the way in which he presents himself in his work as one of those ontologically untidy individuals mentioned in the first chapter. The very mechanics of Gonzo utterances—the exaggerated certainty, violent and profane hyperbole, and parodic reproduction of hegemonic norms—cannot but help to divulge the existence of a constitutive ambiguity, inviting us to read him "against" his word. Reading Thompson, then, consists of an intricate set of negotiations, where the double bind (a concept used in several different contexts—all linked by a certain homology of structure) operates in a way corresponding to how Frederic Jameson understands *Blue Velvet* and *Something Wild* to be nostalgia films: "[T]hese films can be

read as dual symptoms: they show a collective unconscious in the process of trying to identify its own present at the same time that they illuminate the failure of this attempt, which seems to reduce itself to the recombination of various stereotypes of the past" (*Postmodernism* 296)

In this light, Gonzo is revealed to be a modality of failure. The attempt to identify the present results in the reification of the past, a price Thompson (and Jameson's nostalgia films) must pay. Paradoxically though, efforts which are made to be thwarted are not necessarily made in vain. Thompson's desire for a better present through a idealized past represents a career–long fascination with what Jameson would term the cultural dominant. While Thompson was suspicious of his own tendency to romanticize history and imbue the Sixties with an essential character, he was equally unable to conceive of the Sixties without this nostalgia. Aware of the limitations of his approach, and yet lacking the conceptual vocabulary to describe them, Thompson's Gonzo approach—though potent in the peak years—has fallen into decline and relative obsolescence, maybe due to sheer frustration. Perhaps he has "no insight into himself" because of his inability to anticipate (and counteract, if possible) the failure of Gonzo–as–critique. Jameson runs up against a similar barricade in his attempts to theorize culture, but unlike Thompson, has the conceptual vocabulary to at least articulate his failures, instead of "an unhappiness that doesn't know its name, that has no way of telling itself apart from genuine satisfaction and fulfillment since it has presumably never encountered this last" (*Postmodernism* 280).

We can learn from Thompson's failures, though. If nothing else, his obsession

with the American Dream represents a fascination with the cultural dominant that, in the intervening years since Thompson was writing about Freak Power, has gradually receded from our cultural vision. For Jameson, postmodernity consists precisely of that effacement and because of it, must be confronted. Without a cultural dominant, the possibility for "radical cultural politics" is foreclosed, its efficacy slowly petrified by the same nostalgic reification which empties historical form of its content. Thus, we have no choice but to hold the hermeneutic circle open—to do otherwise would be to experience our own gradual "flattening" into proper citizens of a one–dimensional society.[1] So, by emphasizing a depth model in lieu of one which charts the intertextuality of surface contiguities, we can ensure that our variation on the cultural dominant Thompson would call the American Dream remains free from the contraction of meaning that accompanies the nostalgic reification of history.

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[1] Even though Jameson admits postmodernism is "internally conflicted and contradictory" he goes on to suggest that, "for good or for ill, we cannot *not* use it" (*Postmodernism* xxii).

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