



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

On the Edge of Reality

Fear and Loathing and the American Dream

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Jón Björgvin Hilmarsson

Maí 2009

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This essay talks about the book *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and the American dream. After the introduction, the first chapter focuses on New Journalism, which is the style in which the book is written, and explores how successful the narrator of the book is in his quest for the American dream with that literature style. In that chapter the battle between fact and fiction in new journalism will also be looked into. This book is a post-modernistic piece of work, and the second chapter examines that claim further. It also examines if Baudrillard's loss of real and the creation of hyperreal is apt in discussing this book. The final chapter then talks about the counter-culture, which is being portrayed in the book, and its relation to the American Dream.

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Introduction

On February 20, 2005, at 5:42 a.m. Hunter S. Thompson put a gun to his mouth and took his own life. He left a suicide note that reads as follows:

“No More Games. No More Bombs. No More Walking. No More Fun. No More Swimming. 67. That is 17 years past 50. 17 more than I needed or wanted. Boring. I am always bitchy. No Fun – for anybody. 67. You are getting Greedy. Act your old age. Relax – This won’t hurt” (Perry 236)

He had written his suicide note some days before the act and titled it “Football Season is Over”. At the time he had become wheelchair bound, in continuous pain and somewhat dependent on others (Perry 236-237). This state of affairs was an anathema to him and his suicide came as no surprise to those who knew him. He had lived his life exactly the way that he wanted to and would end it in the same way.

In reading Hunters work one is never quite sure if they are telling the truth or not, if he made these things up or if they actually happened to him. They were meant as pieces of journalism, but sometimes grew into works of fiction. In this essay the correlation between fact and fiction will be explored, focusing on Hunters most famous work *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A savage journey to the heart of the American dream* (hereafter: *Fear and Loathing*). The difference between fact and fiction will be examined and to what extent the same has any effect on how this book is experienced. The main emphasis of *Fear and Loathing* is the search for the American dream, and the battle between fact and fiction in the book might have its effect on whether or not that search bears any fruit. But the claim here is that *Fear and Loathing* is in fact a successful postmodernist look at the American dream through the eyes of the counter-culture, using the tools of new journalism.

The three chapters of this essay each focuses on one aspect of that statement. The first will deal with new journalism and its relation to this aspect of fact versus fiction, whether it really matters if things are based on facts or not. For a better understanding of that argument, than is

portrayed in this essay, John Hellman's book "*Fables of Fact: The new journalism as new fiction*" is highly recommended. In the second part, the statement that *Fear and Loathing* is in fact a postmodernist piece of work, will be put to the test, and also if Jean Baudrillard's idea of "hyperreal" is apt in discussing the book. If it does, it is further proof that it doesn't matter whether or not this story is true, nothing is "real" anyway, at least according to a "literal" understanding of Baudrillard. In the third chapter the focus will be mostly on the counter-culture and its relation to the American dream and how it is portrayed in the book. How successful is Hunter in his portrayal of the American dream?

1. Fact Vs Fiction in Gonzo and New Journalism

When Hunter Thompson's name crops up, the word "gonzo" is not far off. Nobody knows exactly what gonzo means but that is what Bill Cardozo, then editor of the *Boston Globe Sunday Magazine*, called Hunter's article "*The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved*" when it appeared. He believed that this article was a breakthrough in journalism or to quote him; "Forget all this shit you've been writing, this is it; this is pure Gonzo. If this is a start, keep rolling (Perry 128)". This may have been the first time this word was used about Hunter and his work but certainly not the last. In time Hunter and Gonzo became synonymous with each other and though Hunter tried to describe through the years what Gonzo was, the best description would simple be, as he said "Gonzo is what I do" (Perry 129).

The fact is that Hunter stumbled on to this style of reporting, called Gonzo, sort of by accident. While writing the article for the Kentucky piece he hit a major writer's block and just couldn't write anything. With the deadline looming and the presses waiting for him he decided in desperation to send in the notes he had written in his notebook while covering the race. Surprisingly, for Hunter, the editor liked it and asked for more, so he sent him the rest, editing it a little bit and adding some information. These notes had been taken by a seasoned reporter during the drunken weekend with Ralph Steadman at the Kentucky Derby. While Hunter wrote in his notebook, Ralph drew caricatures of the people that they meet there. Combine these two activities together and you get a fresh new look at a tired old thing. At first Hunter thought that he would be seriously ridiculed for the article, but as soon as it came out people started congratulating him for a great piece (Perry 127-128). What was so different about this article, compared to the standard kind of reporting, was that Hunter placed himself and Ralph at the centre of the story instead of focusing on such trivial things as the horse race itself. In the old and recognised style of journalism the writer tried at great lengths to seem objective to what he was writing about, but Hunter, along with advocates of New Journalism,

rejected this “assumed perspective of “objectivity” and its reliance on official, often concealed, sources. Instead, they sought new forms and frankly asserted their personal perspectives” (Hellmann 3). So instead of trying to keep up the façade of objectivity, Hunter tells the story from his own perspective with all his preconceptions, judgements and hatred, cynicism and personal views on the subject matter. We know that this is his view on the story and therefore read it with the knowledge that not everything is necessarily true. The hard facts of the stories were normally true but his description of scenes tended to be somewhat exaggerated. Therefore the readers do not fall into the trap of believing everything that is written in the story and look at it with a more critical eye, in the process uncovering the real story.

The terms “new journalism” and “nonfiction novel” came about during the sixties. They can be dated to the publication of Tom Wolfe’s “*Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-flake Streamline Baby*” and Truman Capote’s “*In Cold Blood*”. Both authors had become frustrated with the restraints they felt they were under, especially Wolf, a journalist like Hunter, and wanted to break free and experiment with new ideas. As a result of this they blended together the tools from fiction and journalism, using journalistic methods to create a novel and using fiction tools and methods to create journalism (Hellmann 1-2). But of course Wolfe and Capote were not the only people experimenting with this new method of storytelling, they were merely the more famous ones. Hunter was obviously on the same path. His style, the Gonzo style, involved immersing himself, or rather his narrator persona, into the middle of the story, armed with ample amounts of drugs, booze and wit and seeing what havoc he could stir up, while all the time trying to take notes to record things “as they happened” (Perry 141). One could say that he created the stories that he reported on in his work, not by making them up, but by inducing them with chemicals and therefore the situations in the stories are his doing. This is comparable to the reality TV rapidly gaining in popularity: the situations aren’t

necessarily fake but created to induce reactions from the participants. This is to a certain extent a visual form of Hunter's experiments in literature.

It isn't a coincidence that so many people started on this path of New Journalism around the same time. It can be seen as a response to the cultural developments that were taking place at that period. After the election of John F. Kennedy and his ensuing assassination, the war in Vietnam, the generational and racial conflicts and heated political battles all being shown in greater quantity on the mass media of television, radio and newspaper than before, really had a significant influence on the American public. All these things seemed like something out of a novel, more fictional than real, and the normal tools of newspaper journalism were simply inadequate to comprehensibly portray what was really going on (Hellmann 2). Or as Nicolaus Mills stated: "A who, what, where, when, why style of reporting could not begin to capture the anger of a black power movement or the euphoria of a Woodstock" (Hellmann 3). Most opponents of the new journalism style of reporting would use the argument that these pieces rely on fiction or lies instead of the truth, and one can understand their case. But a closer look at these new journalist pieces, like *Fear and Loathing*, shows us that most of the hard facts in the stories are usually true and the smaller details in them are less significant than the big picture that is being painted. So yes, they may not be completely accurate up to a tee, but the main story, the big picture and the larger truth is what is really being sought out here in these articles (Hellmann 3). This battle between journalistic styles is best portrayed by Hellmann here:

"Admirers of conventional journalism have portrayed the conflict with new journalism as one of objectivity versus subjectivity and fact versus fiction. However, it is actually a conflict of a disguised perspective versus an admitted one, and a corporate fiction versus a personal one. In either case, journalism is necessarily an extension of all human perception and communication in its fictional (that is, shaping) quality. Because it is a product of the human mind and language, journalism can never passively mirror the whole of reality, but must instead actively select, transform, and interpret it. The problem with conventional journalism is that, while it inevitably shares in these limitations (or opportunities), it nevertheless refuses to acknowledge

the creative nature of its “news,” instead concealing the structuring mechanism of its organizational mind behind masks of objectivity and fact” (4).

So it could be said that new journalism is a political statement of not believing blindly what you are being told and not to follow the establishment like sheep. It asks its readers to question their society and try and see through its lies.

The role of the Beats and the Hippies, or the counter-culture in general, cannot be underestimated here. The reason for the formation of these subcultures in America is simply that a large part of the American youth became disillusioned with what was going on in the world, such as the Vietnam War. Whether or not they are called Beats or Hippies is really irrelevant, apart from the generational difference, because that is just a name put to a group of people that were seen as outsiders by the establishment. These labels were meant as derogatory terms but the counter-culture embraced them and appropriated them for their own means. And it is with these people that the members of the new journalism style found their audience with magazines like *Rolling Stone* and other counter-culture mouthpieces. With a movement of people that were purposely going against the established order, it was inevitable that their influences would leak out into other aspects of the culture. So even though new journalism and nonfiction novels may have been an important stylistic change in literature and journalism, they were in some ways an inevitable development in this cultural atmosphere. In a way there is a sort of a symbiotic relationship between this new literature style and the counter-culture; one would probably not exist without the other. The counter-culture created the breeding ground for these styles to develop, and this literature recruited more people into this subculture, spreading their word to the masses. New Journalism was a literature style that was going against the established order of things, much like the counter-culture was going against the established order of the American society. Therefore one could easily be identified with the other.

In many respects, Hunter S. Thompson is also an offspring of his cultural situations. As Perry points out in his book, Hunter had always been an outsider, which is why he may have associated himself with the counter-culture later on. In his youth, while still at high school, he mingled a lot with his classmates of the upper class, which he was not a part of. They had firmly established book clubs and let him join because of his knowledge of books and his intelligence. He was an avid reader and a high-school friend of his, Ralston Steenrod, who went to Princeton to be an English major, says that “Hunter was better read as a high school student than most of the people I graduated with from Princeton” (Perry 21-22). Although he was allowed to associate with the upper class people, he was always an outsider in their world. Yet his wild streak made it exiting for others to hang out with him. But when it finally caught up with them and he and two other friends got arrested shortly before graduation, his lack of social stature ensured he got the worst deal of the three. He got sentenced to sixty days in the Children’s Home, while the other two got no jail time at all. Furthermore, Hunter was not allowed to take his final exams and graduate. He never officially graduated (Perry 30-31). He joined the army soon after that, but his defiance with authority continued there, until he was “honourably discharged”. The reason for his discharge is that his commanding officers felt that “his rebel and superior attitude seems to rub off on other airmen staff members” (Perry 37). This wild streak and defiance to authority would continue on as a constant theme throughout his life, colouring all his work, including *Fear and Loathing*.

But there are two things that happened in the sixties that would become the early sparks for *Fear and Loathing* and much of his later work. On June 5, 1968, he was watching the California primaries. That night Bobby Kennedy was assassinated. Hunter felt he had witnessed the death of the American dream on television. The second thing that happened is that Hunter decided to witness the death of the American dream first hand by attending the Democratic National Convention in Chicago that following August. And witness it he did.

The demonstrators against the Vietnam War and the police clashed there, with the Chicago police running amok, beating anyone in their way down with force. Hunter himself received a severe thrashing, finally being pushed through a plate glass window, which ironically saved him from further beatings. For weeks afterwards he couldn't talk about the events without crying. When he returned home he wrote, "I went to the Democratic Convention as a journalist, and returned a raving beast" also saying that the convention had "permanently altered my brain chemistry" (Perry 118-119).

So Hunter's interest in the American dream started around 1968 and found its outlet in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. But the main question to answer here is whether or not one should look at the book as a piece of fiction or journalistic account of Hunter's search for the American dream? Much like most of his work, it can be sorted into both columns. A clear indicator of people's problem to put Hunter's work in one specific box can be seen at any bookstore or library. His work can be found in many different places within library or bookstore classification. It can be found in the sociology, literature or history sections for examples and possibly even other sections as well. It all depends on people's personal opinion on what they feel like that specific work should be classified like. My personal opinion is that *Fear and Loathing* is a fictional novel about the American dream using events that really happened.

The new journalism style of writing involved using the tools of fiction to create a flowing, easily read journalistic piece. The main focus of these stories was to uncover the larger truth, or the big picture. In *Fear and Loathing*, the larger truth that the narrator claims is being sought out is the search for the American dream. That is a subject that cannot be grasped easily and might very well be meant as a self-parody. Therefore this larger truth does not necessarily stand out as the main focus point in the book but it is always there in the background. The subtitle of the book is even "*A savage journey to the heart of the American*

dream". The book is created out of two separate journeys that Hunter went on with a former Legal Aid lawyer Oscar Zeta Acosta to Las Vegas. These trips were taken with a month gap in between but are melded together in the novel so it seem like the events happened over two continuous weekends. That is just one of many creative licences Hunter allows himself throughout the story.

The biggest fictional aspect of the book though is the narrator himself and his partner in this adventure. It is not Hunter himself telling us the story, but a split alter ego in the form of Raoul Duke and his sidekick Dr. Gonzo. This metafictional device allows the author to use his narrator persona to enter the more fictive world of parody, and therefore Hunter is able to "flatten and warp his representations of actuality without falsifying them, because he has clearly represented them as products of a flattening and warping mind. The persona is in part a narrative device which can be used to distort the surfaces of realism in order to reveal their underlying truth" (Hellmann 69). As Hellmann also points out this, self-caricature is "not what E. M. Forster would call a "round" or "realistic" character. He has virtually no complexity of thought or motivation, and he does not undergo subtle changes from experience" (69). Instead of having his persona "rounded" or "realistic", Hunter bestows on the narrator persona certain characteristics and objects that are associated with the character. Like his affinity with Wild Turkey bourbon, exotic cars, powerful handguns, the Vincent Black Shadow motorcycle, drugs, extremely amplified music and violent rhetoric. This is much in line with other flat, two-dimensional characters in literature like James Bond and Sherlock Holmes. They have certain trademark characteristics that one instantly recognises and without them they would be rather flat and predictable (Hellmann 70). Therefore the main character in the story is in essence a fictional one allowing Hunter as the author to create seemingly fictional events. That is, apart from the fact that they are actual events that happened to Hunter in reality (although under the influences of heavy hallucinogenic drugs)

or as Hellmann points out: “he uses new journalism to write fabulation, placing his work on an “edge” between fact and fantasy” (75).

What complicates things even more when trying to see what is fact and what is fiction is the reality that even though the Raoul character is a fictional one, it shares many of Hunter's own characteristics, only in a slightly exaggerated form. This self-caricature is not a representation of a complex human being, but rather a narrative device. The distinction between the two, the created persona and Hunter himself, became less and less clear as the years wore on though. This would mainly be due to Hunter carrying this persona over into his lectures, interviews and general public exposure (Hellmann 72). Further mixing of the two would come due to two films being made about Hunter, *Where the Buffalo Roam* and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Therefore the real Hunter S. Thompson is hard to point out, as this persona of the wild, out of control journalist being the general public perception of him. This persona on the other hand helped Hunter to create a unique writing style, best seen in *Fear and Loathing*. As Hellmann points out, that book established confusion between fabulation and new journalism and that; “In *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* Thompson creates a verbal construct in which the reader is never sure whether he is experiencing extraordinary fact or extraordinary fantasy. He is only sure it is not realism. Thompson achieves this unique contract through the device of the persona” (73). And he goes on to say that “the book is, then, even in its most general subject and presentation, either a report of an actual experience which was largely fantasy or an actual fantasy which is disguised as report. Journalism only in the loosest sense, what is reported is the state of the persona’s mind and, metaphorically, of the nation” (74).

Then considering the Raoul persona as a narrative device, we can see that he is a representation of America at that time and that the entire story is a parody of the American dream, coming at the end of an era that was full of hope and optimism but ended in broken

dreams and dead flowers. The story is a parody of the American dream because if we look at Raoul as a representation of America, then America has some serious issues to work through. What better way to describe this era and Hunter's own version of the American dream than this book? It can be seen as a violent and schizophrenic examination of the American culture, performed in the most decadent place in the country. In *Fear and Loathing* one can see people in their true colour because in Las Vegas, or Sin City as some people call it, they can let go of their inhibitions and release their true selves. The normal American dream involves the rags to riches story of having nothing and ending up with everything, usually through hard work. But Las Vegas promises a short cut to that dream, in the form of gambling and good luck. This can be seen as a metaphor for the counter-culture and their hopes to change the world with the message of love and peace through the use of drugs. They gambled everything on the idea that they could change things within the government. They believed they could make a difference, and that peace and love would reign supreme. But as any good gambler knows, the house always wins. In this case that would be the establishment and not the hippies. In the end, it really doesn't matter if what happened in the book is either fact or fiction because what is really being sought out here is not how much drugs the characters can take or how much havoc they can induce, it is about whether or not the American dream is still alive, and if so whose version of it still exists?

2. Post-modernism and the Hyperreal

Before talking at any length about postmodernism it is always a good idea to look at the differences between modernism and postmodernism. Firstly, it is quite obvious that one came before the other otherwise there would not be any use for the prefix of post in front of one of them. And indeed, according to Peter Barry, modernism came earlier, having its beginnings in the early twentieth century and its high point being in the twenty years between 1910 and 1930. The literary high priests of that time, writing in English, included James Joyce, T. S. Eliot, Virginia Woolf and many more. It also had a resurgence around the 1960's but didn't quite gain the same heights. Incidentally, that is about the same time *Fear and Loathing* was written, giving thoughts as to which side it could be identified. But postmodernism has only been a recognised critical term since around the 1980's (Barry 81-82). The differences between these two terms are often hard to establish but as Peter Barry points out in *Beginning Theory* the difference is mostly in mood and tone or attitude. He specifies 5 important characteristics that can be found in modernistic writing:

1. A new emphasis on impressionism and subjectivity, that is, on *how* we see rather than *what* we see (a preoccupation evident in the use of the stream-of-consciousness technique).
2. A movement (in novels) away from the apparent objectivity provided by such features as: omniscient external narration, fixed narrative points of view and clear-cut moral positions.
3. A blurring of the distinction between genres, so that novels tend to become more lyrical and poetic, for instance, and poems more documentary and prose like.
4. A new liking for fragmented forms, discontinuous narrative, and random-seeming collages of disparate materials.
5. A tendency towards reflexivity, so that poems, plays and novels raise issues concerning their own nature, status, and role. (82)

He also goes on to say that postmodernism shows affinity with the same characteristics but the difference between them being difference in mood and tone. In modernism there is more nostalgia for earlier times and pessimism and despair about the future which takes hold in the fragmented aspects of their work. The postmodernist on the other hand celebrates the future

and find fragmentation an exhilarating and liberating phenomenon from the stifling restraints of the established order. And in tone “postmodernism rejects the distinction between “high” and “popular” art which was important in modernism, and believes in excess, in gaudiness, and in “bad taste” mixtures of qualities” (Barry 84).

Before deciding whether or not *Fear and Loathing* fits the category of modernism or postmodernism, it is best to see if the book has any of the five characteristics listed above. The first one talks about emphasis on impressionism and subjectivity, which is clearly evident in this book. When Hunter set out to write this story his hope was to “record everything as it happened . . . the eye and mind would be functioning as a camera” (Perry 141). And there was to be “no alterations in the darkroom, no cutting or cropping, no spotting . . . no editing” (Perry 141). This plan did not quite work out exactly as planned since he was so loaded up on drugs most of the time, but fortunately his notebook gave him substantial material to write about and flashbacks of the trip gave him the rest. It also helped him that he used a tape recorder to document some of the shenanigans. So the emphasis in the book is not on what the narrator sees but much rather on how he sees it, which is loaded up on drugs, in a paranoid and schizophrenic state of mind. Furthermore most of his notebook entry’s would be a stream-of-consciousness writing since he is trying to write things as they happen.

The second characteristic can also be applied to this novel since there is no omniscient external narration. The narrator in this story is Hunter’s self-caricature Raoul Duke who has no idea what is coming next in the story. He seems to just go with the flow and we see what happens to him in different situations in the story. On the other hand, there is a fixed narrative point of view in this story which is Raoul’s. The reader sees the story through his eyes alone, except for one chapter, chapter nine in part two, which is an excerpt from the tape recorder they took with them. However a clear-cut moral position is hard to find in this book. It seems to condone any unlawful activity known to man, with perhaps the exception of murder. The

heroes (or anti-heroes) of this book intake unknown amounts of drugs, break countless laws, run out on their hotel bills and scare anyone that stands in their way and interestingly, while the main characters get involved in these illegal activities, the reader roots for them and hopes that they won't get caught. Therefore, as moral positions go, one is not quite sure where one stands after reading this book.

The third characteristic quite obviously fits to this book. *Fear and Loathing*, Hunter Thompson and new journalism are a great example of blurring of distinction between genres. New journalism, as discussed earlier, is a blending of fiction and journalism, sometimes making it hard to figure out where one stops and the other starts. And Hunter's book *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* blurs these lines even further, due to the narrator persona of Raoul that Hunter creates. When reading the book the reader is never quite sure if these things really happened or if Hunter just made them up. Therefore he's not sure if he is reading facts or fiction.

The fourth characteristic concerns a revived liking for fragmented forms, discontinuous narrative, and random-seeming collages of disparate materials. That would seem to fit this book since the narrator jumps back and forth in time, and the story itself is comprised of fragmented memories of what the narrator remembers from the trip. This is a fragmented story coming from a fragmented mind.

The fifth and final characteristic talks about reflexivity within the work itself, raising issues about its own nature. This is evident at the very beginning of the book where the narrator explains what this story is about that he is in the process of writing. "But what was the story? Nobody had bothered to say. So we would have to drum it up on our own. Free Enterprise. The American Dream. Horatio Alger gone mad on drugs in Las Vegas. Do it *now*: pure Gonzo journalism" (Thompson 12). One can look at these lines as a guideline of what

the book is about and the way he makes up the story as he goes. So thus instead of hiding his sources and the fact that a lot of the story might have to be made up, he tells us right from the beginning so that we read the story with the preconception that not all of it is necessarily true. Telling the reader to look at the piece as not wholly true is more than many journalists do, who comfortably hide behind anonymity and sources. Furthermore, near the end of the book the narrator bitterly criticises the press, which he belongs to himself:

“The press is a gang of cruel faggots. Journalism is not a profession or a trade. It is a cheap catch-all for fuckoffs and misfits – a false doorway to the backside of life, a filthy piss-ridden little hole nailed off by the building inspector, but just deep enough for a wino to curl up from the sidewalk and masturbate like a chimp in a zoo-cage” (Thompson 200).

This perhaps shows what Hunter, or Raoul Duke, really thought about his own profession.

It is evident that *Fear and Loathing* can easily be classified as either modernistic or post-modernistic since it has many of the characteristics these theories have. The question then is: in which category should it be classified. As previously stated the differences between these two theories can be found in the mood and tone or attitude. This novel has an anarchistic feel to it, the heroes seemingly doing whatever pleases them. Their constant drug taking can be interpreted as an escape from the savageness of the everyday American life and the realities of their culture. Whenever the real world slips in, like when they turn on the television and see what is going on in Vietnam, the reader just want to slip back into the drug hallucinations with them for they seem less violent than the real world. Yet even with all this paranoia and craziness, there is still a feeling of optimism in the book. As the narrator says himself about their trip; “It was a classic affirmation of everything right and true and decent in the national character. It was a gross, physical salute to the fantastic *possibilities* of life in this country – but only for those with true grit. And we were chock full of that” (18). After reading the book these lines may seem like a joke to most people, but the fact is they are true. Because the narrator is pointing out that they are exercising their freedom to act out their craziness, to

explore the “*possibilities*” of what they can do in this “Land of the free”. Hence the mood of the book is not pessimistic about the future, and nostalgic about the past, but rather a celebration of the now, of the passing moment. Therefore this book can be placed on the postmodernist side instead of the modernist, in view of mood. The other part that separates the two theories apart was the attitude about “high” and “popular” art. The postmodernists enjoyed the blending of the two together, and what city in the world is a better representation of that blending than Las Vegas? Therefore one can feel confident in categorising this book as a postmodern piece of work.

One of the more revered and debated author and philosopher in the postmodernist section is Jean Baudrillard. His most celebrated work is his book “*Simulacra and Simulations*” where he deals with, among other things, the loss of the real and the creation of a hyperreal. He points out that due to film, television and advertising people have lost the distinction between real and imagined, reality and illusion, surface and depth. The result of this erosion is a culture of “hyperreality” (Barry 87). *Fear and Loathing* and the surge of new journalism are both a reaction to this culture and a catalyst to it. As stated before, new journalism came to fruition in an era when the news and culture of the time had become so surreal that it felt more like fiction than fact. Witnessing the murders of innocent civilians in Vietnam, the assassination of JFK and Bobby Kennedy, the rise of the counter-culture and civil rights movements, all these things were being broadcast into the lives of everyday people through the media of television, radio, film, newspaper and even music. It became increasingly harder for people to distinguish between what parts were real and what parts were not. The fact is that the reality we live in is made up of signs that each of us translates into meaning. And the media of course also deals in these signs. An example of this is when you see a policeman you normally translate that into law and order or security. However what Baudrillard suggests is that because of the massive amount of opposite and seemingly paradox

signs, for example from the media, the signs have lost their meaning. Baudrillard's loss of reality comes in a series of steps that Barry points out in *Beginning Theory*. First there is the basic reality, the sign that you see represents the basic reality that it stands for. In *Fear and Loathing* that could be seen as the trip itself, for Hunter and Oscar took this trip in reality. The second stage is the sign that misrepresents or distorts the actual reality behind it. A good example of this in *Fear and Loathing* is the characters of Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo. They are both exaggerated caricatures of Hunter and Oscar, but not the actual them. They are deliberate misrepresentations of the actual people that went on the journey portrayed in the book. The third stage is the sign which disguises that there is no corresponding reality behind it. In *Fear and Loathing* this could be represented by Las Vegas itself, for reasons that will be made clear soon. The fourth and last stage is a sign that bears no relation to any reality at all, like a sort of abstract painting of reality. (Barry 87-88).

In *Simulacra and Simulations*, Baudrillard uses Disneyland to explain this third stage of the sign. He points out that "everywhere in Disneyland the objective profile of America, down to the morphology of individuals and the crowd, is drawn" (12). In some ways Disneyland could be seen as a sign of the second stage, a misrepresentation of America. Nevertheless it is in fact "a simulation of the third order" (12). He goes on to say that:

"Disneyland exists in order to hide that it is the "real" country, all of "real" America that *is* Disneyland (a bit like prisons are there to hide that it is the social in its entirety, in its banal omnipresence, that is carceral). Disneyland is presented as imaginary in order to make us believe that the rest is real" (12).

Therefore "Disneyland has the effect of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus saving the reality principle" (Barry 89). That would mean, within postmodernism, that the distinction between what is real and what is simulated is no longer there. Everything is a model or an image, all is surface without depth. That would be the distinction of Baudrillard's hyperreal (Barry 89). In this example it is quite easy to swap out Disneyland for Las Vegas,

for they are both a form of amusement parks where people come to escape from the real world, one is for children while the other is for adults. Which would explain the previous statement of Las Vegas being seen as a third-order simulation.

Given that Las Vegas is like Disneyland, a third-order simulation, then we could say that this story takes place in a stage of hyperreal. The loss of real means that there is no difference whether or not the things in this story happened, there is no distinction between real and imaginary. Everything in this story is simply surface without any depth, just words on a page, written to entertain people. As a result, the debate between whether or not this book is fact or fiction becomes obsolete, since there is no difference between the two. Baudrillard's view on things is in some way at the extreme end of the postmodernist theory but quite an interesting one. If his writing is taken literally, but not as a parody of western life and its hypocrisy, as Baudrillard meant it (Svansson 8), there wouldn't be much use for literary critics or theorists since there is no depth to anything, just surface. Furthermore people could start denying atrocities that happened, saying that nothing is real and they didn't actually happen. One could say that Baudrillard show us that "without a belief in some of the concepts which postmodernism undercuts – history, reality and truth for instance – we may well find ourselves in some pretty repulsive company" (Barry 89-90). The bottom line here is that Baudrillard states that that world that we live in is becoming less and less real and therefore this book is perfect in portraying that world since everything that happens in the book seems unreal. The best way in describing a seemingly unreal world is to take actual events and make them feel like fiction. Which is exactly what Hunter does in this book.

3. The Counter-culture and the American Dream

According to Hellmann quoted in the first part of this essay, *Fear and Loathing* is journalism on the most basic level of things and what Hunter is actually reporting on is the state of his own mind, and metaphorically, of the nation (74). However, the suggestion here is that it is not the state of the nation's mind that he is reporting on but rather that of the counter-culture, and the rest of the nation is represented by the other people he meets on his journey. This trip took place in 1971, four years after the summer of love. At that time things had started to fall apart for the flower generation, deflating the illusion that drugs like acid or weed would bring about new enlightenment for people and that everybody would live in peace and harmony. Death of highly public figures within the hippie community like Janis Joplin and Jimi Hendrix and the assassinations of political figures like Robert (Bobby) Kennedy and Martin Luther King took their toll on people's belief in love and peace. And with the famous Kent State shootings the figurative final nail in the hippie coffin was nailed, and things deteriorated for them after that. Even though the hippie community might have been dwindling at the time of the story, the counter-culture as such was still alive. It will probably keep on surviving since there will always be outsiders in any community, and they will form subcultures in opposition to the established order. But as Hunter said himself this book was "a kind of a weird celebration for an era that [he] figured was ending" (Perry 146). He goes on to say that "[he] kind of assumed that this was sort of a last fling; that Nixon and Mitchell and all those people would make it very soon impossible for anybody to behave that way and get away with it" (146). Then looking at Raoul as a representation of the counter-culture, this can be seen as its final act of defiance against a growingly fascist government, at least in Hunter's eyes.

Though Hunter could be considered a member of the counter-culture, he would probably not be seen as a hippie. Although he enjoyed the drugs of the decade, it would be hard to believe that he was much into the spiritual aspect of the hippies. What probably

interested him much more was the political aspect of the counter-culture that emerged, and the battle for equality. Hunter had always been an outsider in society, wanting to do things his own way, which is probably why he gravitated to other likeminded people. That gravitation to people that share your belief can be seen as the basis for the creation of this counter-culture, a bunch of likeminded people that were fed up with their society, joining up together. And if their number, when joined together, becomes great enough they might actually make a difference. Hunter's description of these times can be found in *Fear and Loathing* and they are as follows:

“There was madness in any direction, at any hour. If not across the Bay, then up the Golden Gate or down 101 to Los Altos or La Honda.... 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” (67-68)

There was true optimism for the future around the summer of love, and Hunter shared in that optimism. But in these lines one can almost feel the sadness that all these hopes did not come to fruition. Hunter seems to be saying that they had the chance to change things but they blew it. The guilt of that may be the reality that the characters, ergo the counter-culture, in the book are escaping from by indulging in their hallucination in the most unreal city in America. They turn to the drugs to block out the real world which seem more violent than ever. When it escapes through the haze of drugs, in the form of television or radio, those mediums are quickly shut off so they don't have to deal with the reality of their world. The drugs have become their escape from reality instead of their salvation for the future. They have started using them as we use television today to block out the pressures of the real world, to zone out.

They have turned to fiction instead of fact to deal with life. Much like new journalism and Hunter did.

If one looks at the hippie or counter-culture phenomenon in light of political sides theirs would definitely be more on the left side. Therefore the hippie's idea of the American dream is not quite the same as that of the normal capitalist member of America. Their version is more in line with Walt Whitman and Ralph Emerson of being one with nature and your fellow human beings. It varied of course between people what they were looking for within the hippie community but in its core their version of the American dream was about free love, free food, free drugs and shared living, or communes as they were called. In Whitman's *Song of Myself* he praises nature, humans, animals and everything that he can think of. The poem is a celebration of life in all its glory. Whitman even talked about homosexuality, or the love of another man, in some of his poems, much in line with the idea of free love. He was in many ways the "original" hippie. Emerson had great influences on Whitman and they shared the same love of nature, or so it seems. Another thing they seemed to share was their lack of need for materialistic things, simply letting do with food, literature and nature. At least that is the romanticised version of the two (Reidhead 18-20). The hippies obviously shared many of these same beliefs, especially the lack of materialistic things and love for the nature. But the normally accepted version of the American dream is the one where someone is able to rise from nothing to something, or to go from rags to riches. In the novel Hunter's character flips both these ideas, the hippies and the normal one, on their head claiming that the American dream is getting something for free. You can see that when they set out on their trip to Las Vegas and Raoul is given \$300 for the trip from the magazine to cover the Mint 400 in Las Vegas. After they get the money Raoul explains to Dr. Gonzo:

"Jesus, just one hour ago we were sitting over there in that stinking baiginio, stone broke and paralyzed for the weekend, when a call comes through from some total stranger in New York, telling me to go to Las Vegas and expenses be damned – and

then sends me over to some office in Beverly Hills where another total stranger gives me \$300 raw cash for no reason at all . . . I tell you, my man, this is the American Dream in action!”(11).

As always, Hunter's views are a little bit askew from everybody else's, even within the counter-culture. So this could be seen not just as a parody of the everyday Joe's version of the American dream but also the counter-cultures. Indeed the hippies preached about sharing food and drugs and living in communes but here Hunter has taken that idea and expanded on it to the stage where getting things for free, without working for them, is the promised land.

However this isn't the only time Raoul claims he has found the American dream. Another model for it, in his opinion, is the owner of Circus Circus casino which the character frequents, a seemingly crazy casino with trapeze artists, live animals and all the normal circus stuff you would expect. When talking to one of the staff, he hears the story of the owner who wanted to run away and join the circus himself when he was a kid. And “now the bastard has his *own* circus, and a licence to steal too” (Thompson 191). Again this is a version of the American dream with a twist. One could simply look at the owner as the classic ordinary Joe coming from nothing to owning his dream. But this dream did not involve getting rich through hard work; it involved getting rich by stealing people's, that is gamblers', money. Because, like it has been stated before, the house always wins in the casinos. And again, Hunter introduces the idea of getting money for free as an ideal thing.

There is also a third incantation of the American dream in the book, and that one is perhaps the most important in light of the counter-culture. There is one chapter in the book that is said to be a transcription of a tape recording that was made during their trip since the manuscript of that scene made no sense to the editor. That is probably not true and is most likely just a narrative tool used by Hunter to break up the story and tell this fable in a more coded way than previously. In this chapter Raoul and Dr. Gonzo stop at an all night diner for some food and in their conversation with the waitress they mention that they are reporters in

search of the American dream. The waitress misunderstands them and thinks they are looking for a place by that name and asks the cook if he knows the directions there. After more confusion the waitress and the cook figure that they are actually looking for the Psychiatrist's Club on Paradise. That is where they think the American dream is, but now "the only people who hang out there [are] a bunch of pushers, peddlers, uppers and downers, and all that stuff" (Thompson 165). And Lou the cook says about this club that it is "a place where all the kids are potted when they go in, and everything . . . but it's not called what you said, the American Dream" (166). They even give them directions to the place, i.e. directions to the American Dream, but the directions are very confusing. In essence what they are talking about here is the counter-culture in the late sixties. This place is called the Psychiatrist's Club, and one of the leaders of the counter-culture was the acid guru Timothy Leary, who happened to be a psychiatrist, even teaching for a while at Harvard (Whitmer 28-37). This club therefore could be seen as the club of people who followed Leary in his acid quest, who are now all pushers or peddlers in Hunter's view. It certainly could be seen as a poke at Leary from Hunter, but it is impossible to know for sure. Most ironically this place is on the corner of Paradise, but what paradise is that? It could be seen as the street that the club is at or the Promised Land that the American dream of the counter-culture was situated at. The counter-culture had high hopes for their dream but as Leo the cook said it was "a place where all the kids are potted when they go in". And indeed, most of the hippies were stoned when they tried to get to their American dream, and that dream was not necessarily every American's version of the American dream. But the saddest part of this fable comes when they finally find this place. All they find are the burnt remains of the club but now it is only "a huge slab of cracked, scorched concrete in a vacant lot full of weeds" (Thompson 168). When they ask around what happened to the place they are told that it had "burned down about three years ago" (168) or around 1968. That is incidentally the year that Martin Luther King and Robert (Bobby)

Kennedy are assassinated, the riots outside the democratic convention take place (of which Hunter participated in), and probably most importantly for Hunter S. Thompson the year that Nixon was elected president. Hunter had a lifelong hatred towards Nixon, and seeing him being elected president of the United States probably marked the end of the counter-culture and their hopes for a change in Hunter's mind. That is the year everything that the counter-culture had tried to build up burned back to the ground. And with it their American Dream.

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