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Gonzo journalism in the work of Hunter S. Thompson

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Z á s a d y p r o v y p r a c o v á n í :

V úvodu práce student stručně představí osobu novináře Huntera S. Thompsona a uvede jej do kontextu amerického nového žurnalismu a drogové sub-kultury především sedmdesátých let dvacátého století. S využitím relevantní sekundární literatury dále student vysvětlí pojem ?gonzo žurnalistika? a srovná ji s jinými žánry a formami žurnalistické práce. Jádrem práce pak bude analýza Thompsonovy knihy Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas, jednak z hlediska metody, kterou autor použil, jednak z hlediska tematického, především se zaměřením na motiv ?amerického snu,? jeho dosažitelnosti a případné kritiky, kterou jej autor podrobuje. Student své vývody bude ilustrovat ukázkami z primárního textu a konfrontovat s kritickými zdroji. Závěrem svou analýzu shrne a pokusí se zhodnotit postavení Thompsona v žurnalistice, shrne jeho kritickou recepci a jeho další literární či kulturní vliv.

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Souhlasím s prezenčním zpřístupněním své práce v Univerzitní knihovně.

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Abstract

This paper discusses Gonzo journalism and its characteristics in the work of Hunter S. Thompson. The genre's main features are described in the theoretical part of this paper, and then exemplified in Thompson's seminal novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*.

The paper also concentrates on the novel's underlying theme; the search for the American Dream. This term is briefly described in the theoretical part and then contrasted with Thompson's opinion about such phenomenon.

Key words

Hunter S. Thompson, Gonzo journalism, New journalism, the 1960s in the USA, the American Dream

Abstrakt

Tato práce zkoumá charakteristické znaky Gonzo žurnalismu v práci Hunter S. Thompsona. Hlavní rysy tohoto žánru jsou popsány v teoretické části práce a následně ilustrovány na příkladech z Thompsonova románu *Strach a hnus v Las Vegas*.

Tato práce se dále soustředí na hlavní téma knihy, což je hledání Amerického snu. Tento termín je stručně vysvětlen v teoretické části a následně porovnáván s Thompsonovou představou o tomto jevu.

Klíčová slova

Hunter S. Thompson, Gonzo žurnalismus, Nový žurnalismus, 60. léta ve Spojených státech amerických, Americký sen

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1 Introduction

Hunter Stockton Thompson was an American novelist, journalist and political activist who is regarded to as the inventor of a journalistic subgenre called Gonzo. Thompson's specific style emerged from the New journalism, "the umbrella term" which included "about a dozen of styles" (Boyle 73) and which has been used to describe the rising generation of experimental journalists in the early 1960s. The most notable representatives, besides Thompson, were "Tom Wolfe, Jimmy Breslin, Gay Talese, Joan Didion, John Sack, Michael Herr" and also "a few old hands, like Truman Capote and Norman Mailer" (Weingarten 7)

The aim of this paper is to define Gonzo journalism and its importance in contemporary journalism, along with characterization of the New journalism and explanation of its rapid growth. To provide a comprehensive research of Gonzo, it is essential to introduce Hunter S. Thompson's life and personality. This is due to the fact that Gonzo stories are highly dependent on its central character, the writer. The paper also provides a concise analysis of several theories of Gonzo's origin as a word and its meaning.

The second part of this paper is comprised of two loosely interconnected parts. The first part focuses on Gonzo elements in Thompson's partly non-fiction novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Although not being the first work by Thompson that incorporates features of Gonzo journalism, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is believed to be a pivotal work of this style; a groundbreaking work, which set a whole new standard in subjective journalism. The book has been known mainly for its extraordinary, unpredictable characters and their drug-ridden adventures in Las Vegas, which represents a place where reality and fiction sometimes swap and influence one another. The clash between facticity and fiction is not only a distinctive feature of this multi-layered piece of literature but also of Gonzo journalism in general.

The second, thematical focus is placed on the book's underlying theme: search for the American Dream. This term is briefly explained in the theoretical part and contrasted with Thompson's critical opinion about The United States' culture and politics.

Hunter Thompson said about the novel that “the story came from his subconscious and that people saw more in it than he had put there.” (McKeen 174) While this remark could be applied to majority of the book, it is not inconsistent with the possibility that he subconsciously put there more than he would do deliberately. So, it is a task of this paper to unfold Thompson’s twisted subconscious and try to reach the core of his attitude towards American values.

2 The New journalism

The purpose of this chapter is to clarify the meaning of New journalism, discuss its roots and representatives, which is necessary for further analysis of Hunter S. Thompson’s Gonzo style.

The New journalism emerged in the 1960s as a reaction to conventional inverted pyramid technique, which has been used by *The New York Times* at the turn of the 20th century. “The inverted pyramid organized a story with the lead stating the salient theme in the opening paragraph, the body of the story in the middle paragraphs, and the sharp, clever kicker at the end.” (Weingarten 13)

Generally, a reportage should answer six basic questions: “Who? What? Where? When? Why? and How?” (Harcup 3). Objective journalism reduced the why aspect which attracted a wide spectrum of readers, who preferred facts to opinions. As newspaper editors realized “that serious journalism could engage readers as effectively as yellow journalism” the new style of writing became a standard. (Weingarten 14) According to Jack Lule, the inverted pyramid’s main advantage was that the readers might only skim the article to learn the most important facts, as the remaining paragraphs contained additional information. Moreover, the editors could cut the unnecessary paragraphs “to meet time and space requirements.” (Lule 2)

During the 1930s, readers realized that the objective and rather rigid style is not sufficient enough in reflecting sudden changes in the society. Jack Lule attributes this phenomenon to two major events of the 1930s: “the Great Depression and the Nazi threat to global stability.” (Lule 3)

Readers' demand for a new style was an impulse for the creation of Interpretative journalism. Stephen J. A. Ward explains how the newspaper editors reacted:

Newspapers in the 1930s and 1940s introduced weekend interpretations of the past week's events, beat reporters and interpretive columnists with bylines. This tradition of interpretive journalism would gather strength in the second half of the twentieth century in the hands of broadcast journalists, literary journalists and, then, online journalists. (Ward 299)

The Interpretative journalism reintroduced subjectivity in journalistic texts. Literary journalists expanded on that subjective approach by applying a narrative framework to the previously collected pieces of factual information.

Gay Talese was one of the first 1960s reporters, who used this technique, particularly in his article about a former boxer Joe Louis entitled "Joe Louis: The King as a Middle-Aged Man". The groundbreaking article attracted many fellow reporters, especially Tom Wolfe:

With a little reworking the whole article could have read like a short story. [...] The really unique thing about it, however, was the reporting. This I frankly couldn't comprehend at first. [...] My instinctive, defensive reaction was that the man had piped it, as the saying went . . . winged it, made up the dialogue . . . Christ, maybe he made up whole scenes, the unscrupulous geek . . . The funny thing was, that was precisely the reaction that countless journalists and literary intellectuals would have over the next nine years as the New journalism picked up momentum. The bastards are making it up! (Wolfe a¹, 5)

The article's originality inspired Wolfe, who tried to write similar stories, using his own vivid style. Wolfe then got assignments from the *Herald Tribune* and *Esquire* "to cover the Hot Rod & Custom Car show at the Coliseum in New York." (Wolfe b²) The article for the *Herald Tribune* has been finished on time, but the *Esquire* piece was a tough nut for Wolfe; he was not able to start writing. A few days before the deadline, Wolfe told Byron Dobell, the *Esquire*'s managing editor, to find a new writer for the story. Dobell agreed and instructed Wolfe to type his notes and send them to him. As Wolfe started typing, he had a sudden strike of inspiration:

About 8 o'clock that night I started typing the notes out in the form of a memorandum that began, "Dear Byron." [...] By midnight this

¹ WOLFE, Tom. The Birth of 'The New Journalism'; Eyewitness Report by Tom Wolfe. [online]

² WOLFE, Tom. *The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby*: Introduction.

memorandum to Byron was twenty pages long and I was still typing like a maniac. [...] I wrapped up the memorandum about 6:15 A.M., and by this time it was 49 pages long. I took it over to Esquire as soon as they opened up. [...] About 4 P.M. I got a call from Byron Dobell. He told me they were striking out the "Dear Byron" at the top of the memorandum and running the rest of it in the magazine. That was the story, "The Kandy-Kolored Tangerine-Flake Streamline Baby." (Wolfe b)

2.1 The best feature writer in town

The new, quickly forming genre caught attention of many writers of that time. In March 1965, Lilian Ross, the staff writer for the magazine *The New Yorker*, parodied Wolfe's "hyperbolic style" (Weingarten 4) in the article called "Red Mittens". This event signalled a tense relationship between *New York*, "the Sunday supplement of *The New York Herald Tribune*" (Weingarten 2), and its rival *The New Yorker*.

The next month, Tom Wolfe answered with an article entitled "Tiny Mummies! The True Story of the Ruler of 43rd Street's Land of the Walking Dead!" in which he criticised *The New Yorker's* secretive editor William Shawn and his staff. Wolfe referred to Shawn as "a funeral director", his writers as "the walking dead" and his staffers as "tiny mummies". (Weingarten 5) The derisive tone of "Tiny Mummies!..." infuriated Shawn and his staff writers, namely Dwight MacDonal, who reacted to it with a piece called "Parajournalism, or Tom Wolfe and His Magic Writing Machine". In the article, MacDonal disdainfully described Wolfe's style as "a bastard form, having it both ways, exploiting the factual authority of journalism and the atmospheric license of fiction." (Weingarten 6)

The criticism of the New journalists might have been caused by a disruption of understanding between the writer and the reader, a certain unspoken agreement that the presented news is merely a template filled with facts. And as the template has been erased the readers suddenly lost their feeling of security; a feeling they were not being deceived.

Tom Wolfe explains, there was a competition among newspaper reporters, for an unofficial award: Best Feature Writer in Town. "The 'feature' was the newspaper term for a story that fell outside the category of hard news and the 'award' was only a step to

the final triumph: The Novel.” (Wolfe a, 2)

According to Wolfe, novelists were considered the upper class, the only literary artists. “They had exclusive entry to the soul of man.” (Wolfe c³, 39) Journalists, on the contrary, belonged to the lower class; they were seen merely as collectors of “raw information” that could be shaped and used by the novelists. And then there was the underclass: “people who wrote for popular (‘slick’) magazines or Sunday supplements[.] They weren’t in the game. They were the lumpenproles.” (Wolfe c, 39) And as a sort of “homage to the novelists”, these ‘lumpenproles’ started to “write journalism that would ... read like a novel.” (Wolfe a, 2) Hence, a new genre was created.

The term ‘New journalism’ was first officially used by Tom Wolfe in his 1973 anthology, which was entitled after its subject. Wolfe’s intention was to dissociate himself from traditional journalists who, “without knowing it, wrote in a century-old British tradition in which it was understood that the narrator shall assume a calm, cultivated and, in fact, genteel voice” (Wolfe c, 17)

With sudden changes in the 1960s, the inverted pyramid and other techniques of objective journalism became even more obsolete than in the 1930s. Marc Weingarten gives example of such changes: “War, assassination, rock, drugs, hippies, Yippies, Nixon: how could a traditional just-the-facts reporter dare to provide a neat and symmetrical order to such chaos?” (Weingarten 7)

2.2 New techniques

But the changes in America were not the only important factor that contributed to the growing popularity of New journalism. Tom Wolfe stresses that the sudden interest in journalism was caused by a lack of novels on current topics. In other words, the bold new journalists took advantage of the novelists’ reluctance to cover contemporary events. (Wolfe c, 45) To accomplish this, they had to develop unorthodox methods of writing, so they could reflect life in the 1960s and 1970s.

According to Wolfe, the New Journalists used four main devices in their texts:

³ WOLFE, Tom. *The New Journalism*

The first device is scene-by-scene construction, i.e. recreating individual scenes by the reporter's experience. This also includes the second device – realistic, non-edited dialogues, which involves the reader and helps to define characters as well. The third technique, the third-person point of view, presents scenes through the eyes of a certain character, which builds a relationship between the reader and the character. Wolfe also notes, that despite possible use of the first-person narrative, the journalists should avoid this technique as it provides only a limited and mostly irrelevant perspective. The fourth device could be classified as details, which includes “everyday gestures, habits, manners, customs, styles of furniture, clothing, decoration, [...] various looks, glances, poses, styles of walking and other symbolic details that might exist within a scene.” (Wolfe c, 46-47)

Yet all these devices should be taken merely as a theoretical background, since the writers usually didn't want to be called New journalists. Wolfe understood this and appreciated individual writing styles of each writer connected to the term. He recalls that in New journalism “there were no manifestos, clubs, salons, cliques; not even a saloon where the faithful gathered, since there was no faith and no creed.” (Wolfe c, 37)

John C. Hartsock summarizes writings of some authors associated with the New journalism:

Wolfe portrayed Ken Kesey and the latter's companions, [...] travelling across country, while they were on drugs. [...] Gay Tallese who wrote about personalities and New York before taking on larger, book-length themes in works such as his 1969 best-seller *The Kingdom and the Power*. Norman Mailer wrote about U.S. opposition to the Vietnam War in the 1968 *Armies of the Night*. Sara Davidson along with her friend Joan Didion wrote about social crisis and alternative lifestyles in the late 1960s and 1970s. [...] Then there is the 'gonzo' journalism of Hunter Thompson, in which Thompson does Wolfe one better by reporting on the world while on drugs. (Hartsock 192-193)

2.3 Predecessors of the New journalism

Critics of the new genre claimed there “was nothing new about New journalism” (Weingarten 9) They mentioned Charles Dickens's “Street Sketches”, in which he portrayed life in the working class (Weingarten 11) as an early example of narrative

journalism. Jack London's chronicle *The People of The Abyss*, has also been written from the reporter's/writer's point of view. (Weingarten 14)

Another writer that has used this technique prior to New journalism was George Orwell, mainly in his 1931 book *Down and Out in Paris and London*. For three years, Orwell lived and worked in the lower-class environment, so he could portray a plausible picture of such life. By "using a fiction writer's tools" (Weingarten 16), Orwell managed to create a coherent narrative from his memories. Another similarity between this book and New-journalistic texts is the method of "telling small lies in order to emphasize a big truth." (Weingarten 17) In other words, Orwell picked certain events and arranged them to fit into the narrative. Moreover, he also emphasized certain characters or sometimes even created new ones.

John Hersey used similar method in an article named "Joe Is Home Now", which tells the story of a discharged soldier, returning home after WWII. According to the editor's note preceding the article, Hersey compressed observations of 43 discharged soldiers into one character, Joe Souczak. (Hersey 68) Weingarten states that the story "is a key precursor to the wartime New journalism of John Sack and Michael Herr." (Weingarten 19)

And then there was Truman Capote who was considered the author of fiction and was "largely critical of journalists." (McKeen 79) at first. Yet he helped to define so called non-fiction novel by his 1966 book *In Cold Blood*, which is based on a true story of brutally murdered family from Holcomb, Kansas. Capote, inspired by John Hersey's *Hiroshima*, another "crucial New journalism antecedent", (Weingarten 23) has been working on the book for six years and it is believed to be the second non-fiction novel⁴.

All these notions of the New journalism's unoriginality are logical, yet the critics seem to forget one important thing. The New journalism has been deeply rooted in the 1960s and 1970s, so if stripped of its context, it could be seen merely as Frankenstein's monster of journalism, with clearly visible features of various writing styles. But it was the wild and chaotic era that gave New Journalists the audacity to claim its newness.

⁴ According to Silvio Ricardo Waisbord, the very first non-fiction novel is *Operación Massacre* by an Argentine investigative journalist Rodolfo Walsh. (Waisbord, *Watchdog Journalism in South America: News, Accountability, and Democracy*, Columbia University Press, 2000, ISBN: 0-231-11974-7)

3 Gonzo journalism

Kermit: "You know what you are, Gonzo?"

Gonzo: "What?"

Kermit: "Distinct"

Muppets from Space

While the New journalism was growing in popularity, Hunter S. Thompson's Gonzo journalism suddenly appeared as its extremely subjective version.

In Gonzo journalism, the writer usually focuses on himself and his actions, which means he is an active participant in the story. The writer, who is often under the influence of miscellaneous drugs, describes troubles connected with the writing process itself. William McKeen classifies it as "metajournalism, journalism about the process of journalism." (McKeen 73)

The following sub-chapters examine development of the style along with deeper analysis of its main features.

3.1 Origins of Gonzo journalism

Although elements of Gonzo journalism appeared in Thompson's early works, for instance "The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy," the term Gonzo was first used to describe Thompson's article called "The Kentucky Derby Is Decadent and Depraved". In the story, rather than focusing on the race, Thompson describes seemingly irrelevant events, which included Thompson's lying to a random man at the airport, attempts to obtain press credentials and his first meeting of Ralph Steadman, a hired illustrator for the story. "The Derby ended up playing a minor, almost off-camera role in the story." (McKeen 147)

The article was written in a hurry, due to a serious writer's block and Thompson almost did not meet the deadline. "[He] broke from the narrative and started sending the editors scrawled pages ripped from his journal: half-formed thoughts, sketches, semilucid notes." (McKeen 148) The lack of rewrites later became one of the characteristics of Thompson's style, although he actually did rewrite some of his later texts.

The magazine eventually printed the article word for word "even with the pauses,

thoughts, and jagged stuff like that.” (*AGW*⁵ 91, 1977) Thompson considered it “a shitty article, a classic of irresponsible journalism,” a failure. (cit. in McKeen 149) But, to his great surprise “people were calling it a tremendous breakthrough in journalism, a stroke of genius.” (McKeen 149) And, as indicated, one of the excited reactions came from Bill Cardoso, who encouraged Thompson: “Forget all the shit you’ve been writing, this is it; this is pure Gonzo. If this is start, keep rolling.” (*AGW* 92, 1977) Thompson liked the word and later adopted it as a name of his style: “I didn’t feel I was a part of any group or type of journalist and Gonzo was a good word.” (*AGW* 103, 1977)

3.2 Origins of the word, meaning

The origins and the meaning of the word ‘Gonzo’ are not clear; some people assume it is a loanword from Italian, meaning ‘simpleton’, or ‘fool’ (Collins English Dictionary), others believe that it is “derived from the French Canadian ‘gonzeaux’”, which means ‘shining path’. (McKeen 150)

However, the prevailing opinion is that the word comes from Boston slang. Thompson, confirmed this in an interview: “[Gonzo] is some old Boston word meaning a little bit crazy and off the wall. Sort of a high crazy.” (*AGW* 62, 1976)

Billy Baker, *The Boston Globe* feature writer, claims “the word’s origins are actually much simpler: it’s just “gone” with a -zo suffix added to intensify the word, similar to the transformation of “nut” to “nutzo.” (Baker, web)

If the last interpretation is true, then it’s necessary to clarify the context in which the word ‘gone’ was used. Baker quotes Billy Bulger, a former Senate president from South Boston, who defines it as “a word of caution: ‘He’s out of his mind. He’s gonzo.’” (Baker, web)

According to Public Broadcasting Service website, ‘gone’ was used in the 1960s as a slang word for “cool, groovy or neat”. (Public Broadcasting Service) While the last definition is de facto the complete opposite of Gonzo’s first-draft principle, the words ‘cool’ or ‘groovy’ might be applied for Thompson’s writing. The Free Dictionary

⁵ *Ancient Gonzo Wisdom: interviews with Hunter S. Thompson* edited by THOMPSON, Anita. (see bibliography) When cited, the year of a particular interview is also included in the parenthesis.

defines 'gone' as a slang word for being "in an exhilarated state, as through music or the use of drugs," (The Free Dictionary) which is even more fitting description of Thompson's style.

There are several other definitions of Gonzo, and even experts on Thompson's writing, most of whom had been his close friends, cannot seem to come to a conclusion about the word's origin. It still remains one of the mysteries surrounding Hunter S. Thompson, not dissimilar to the exact percentage of fiction in his texts.

3.3 Gonzo and the New journalism

Gonzo journalism is generally regarded as a sub-genre of the New journalism (Hirst 3), although Thompson himself often expressed reluctance to such claims. He saw Gonzo and New journalism as "intertwined" but did not feel he was "a part of a movement⁶." (AGW 238-239, 1997)

Thompson said that Gonzo journalism was his attempt "to differentiate [himself] from the new journalists." (AGW 242, 1997) He did not want to share any label with others, so he simply accepted Gonzo as his exclusive style.

One of the main differences between the two genres lies in a fact that Gonzo journalist not only uses first-person narrative in his stories, but he also actively participates in them, "as personally involved as possible." (McKeen 151) The personal tone of Gonzo stories seems to be its crucial feature. Thompson said, that "being a part of the story is critical to [him] [...] I get my interest from the adrenaline that comes from being that close." (AGW 154, 1987) And he continued, comparing himself to Tom Wolfe: "Wolfe is not a participant. He is a hell of a reporter. [...] When [he] did the book on Kesey, [*The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*], he wasn't there for a lot of it. He re-created it. I can't do that. It's too damn much work. It's easier to be there." (AGW 154-155, 1987)

⁶ The New journalism was not actually a movement, at least not a conscious movement. However, it is necessary for the veracity of this paper to approach the New journalism as a movement, despite the fact it was rather a group of loosely connected artists.

3.4 Focus on the writer in Gonzo journalism

The first-person storytelling and focus on the writer already appeared in Thompson's early works. One of his first stories, written at age eleven, concerned "his heroics as forward on his basketball team." (McKeen 9)

Thompson, an ardent sports fan, admitted that his writing had been largely influenced by sports journalism. He relished "the freedom to make up words" (McKeen 27) and used various action verbs to make the story vivid. The freedom in sports journalism was something that attracted Thompson, and he once affirmed this by saying there is "a lot more freedom in sports writing than any other kind of writing." (*AGW* 71, 1977)

The first-person point of view later became a device for including himself in the story. Thompson not only described what he saw, but also what he did. As stated by Jay Cowan, in Thompson's biography, "the writer as a combatant was not entirely new, but the writer as the main focal point of the story was, except in the cases of celebrity autobiographies." (Cowan 78)

Thompson, who considered himself "an egomaniac" (cit. in McKeen 267), stated his "ego comes through very heavy, even when [he tries] to write the straightest kind of journalism." (cit. in McKeen 139)

William McKeen compares Thompson to George Plimpton, a New journalists who shared at least two characteristics with Thompson. First, both were sports enthusiasts, and second, they were both "participants in their stories. [...] Although not directly influenced by Plimpton, Hunter could still be described as someone who had taken Plimpton's idea and plugged it into a 220-volt outlet." (McKeen 227) And, to fully understand, by what means, Thompson enhanced an already existing style, it is important to focus on one particularly well-known habit of him: substance abuse.

3.5 Drugs in Gonzo journalism

Thompson was enthusiastic about several different activities, including above-mentioned sports, gun shooting, detonation of explosives and finally alcohol and drug

use. According to William McKeen, Thompson started drinking at the age of 16, due to his father's death followed by developing alcoholism of his mother. (McKeen 13)

Jay Cowan offers a different explanation for Thompson's drinking:

“Hunter started drinking young and probably for the reason many of his peers in Kentucky did, because it was the accepted custom for real men in that part of the country. That, and wanting to imitate the writers he admired, was good enough for Hunter. In the end, as was the case with all his idols, the liquor was Hunter's worst vice.” (Cowan 58)

It is difficult to trace the actual reason of his addiction, but considering the two opinions are not contradictory, it might easily be a combination of both.

Returning to Cowan's quotation, Thompson's favorite writers included Mark Twain, Ernest Hemingway, F. S. Fitzgerald, and some of the Beatniks, especially Jack Kerouac:

“Given [Thompson's] fondness for the Beat Generation, drugs fit in well with the lifestyle he imagined for himself: a writer and adventurer in Kerouac's footsteps, doing dope [and] drinking[.] [...] When nothing else was happening, good drugs could fill in. Even when something was going on, the drugs were still a nice way to amplify anything, turning it into a challenge, a scene, and possibly a story.” (Cowan 48)

Nevertheless, in the later years of Thompson's life, drug intake became an integral part of his daily routine, as much as breathing. Jay Cowan discloses “[Thompson] rarely saw a day without coke for thirty years unless he was asleep.” (Cowan, p. 58) The massive amount of cocaine was one of the reasons for Thompson's later decline as a writer.

It might seem that using drugs was the only possibility to embellish stories, however Thompson's idiosyncratic way of perceiving reality has deeper roots. Gene Espeland, Thompson's colleague from the Air Force Base, recalled Hunter's talent in exaggerating stories: “He made up the craziest stories. A little something would happen in the gym and he'd make a great big story.” (cit. in McKeen 30)

3.6 Factuality and fiction in Gonzo journalism

The often criticised lack of objectivity in the New journalism pales in comparison with Gonzo journalism, where objectivity lost its meaning. Thompson managed to create a hybrid genre, which contained elements of both fiction and nonfiction, leaving readers unable to distinguish reality from fantasy. As stated in previous chapter, the clash between the two worlds came from the drug experience, but it might have been caused by Thompson's prankish nature as well.

Thompson claimed he was inspired by William Faulkner's idea that "the best fiction is far more true than any kind of journalism." (Thompson b⁷) He despised objective journalism and regarded fiction as "a bridge to truth that journalism can't reach" and believed that "facts are lies when they're added up. (Thompson cit. in McKeen 102)

Another reason for the inclusion of fictitious elements in Thompson's works was his literary ambition. According to William McKeen, Thompson saw journalism merely as a job (McKeen 66); a base step towards literary fiction, similarly to other New journalists. He started to "think like a novelist" when he wrote articles. (Weingarten 8)

A prime example of blending fiction and nonfiction is Thompson's second book *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, which is analyzed in the practical part of this paper. The book's main characters, Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo, are alter egos of Thompson and his friend Oscar Zeta Acosta, respectively.

4 The American Dream

The American Dream is a broad term that is generally associated with similarly broad American values, such as 'freedom', 'equality', or 'independence'. (Reel, web) Despite numerous attempts to define the American Dream, it still remains too broad and vague to completely comprehend what it really denotes. In *The American Dream: A*

⁷ THOMPSON, Hunter S., Jacket Copy for *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. [online]

Short History of an Idea That Shaped a Nation, Jim Cullen states the “ambiguity is the very source of [the Dream’s] mythic power. (Cullen 7) Cullen also notes “there is no one American Dream. Instead, there are many American Dreams, their appeal simultaneously resting on their variety and their specificity.” (Cullen 7)

Thus, and due to the scope of this paper, consider the following sub-chapters merely a brief summary of the American Dream’s history.

4.1 Different perspectives of the American Dream

The concept of the American Dream has existed since the Puritan migration in the 17th century. (Cullen 13) The Puritans’ separation from the Church of England led them to a part of America known as New England. Their idea was to reform their religious practice in the new, unspoiled land, which could be shaped in accordance with their ideals. This became their American Dream, although they had never used the phrase.

Cullen draws attention to the fundamental irony of the American Dream: “that its foundations were laid by people who specifically rejected a belief that they did have control over their destinies.” (Cullen 10)

One of the early interpretations of the American Dream was Horatio Alger’s ‘rags to riches’ concept. Alger’s books, starting with *Ragged Dick* in 1867, usually involved a poor boy who moves “from the fringes to become a respected member of society.” (McGlenn, web) Thompson often referred to Alger, usually in a satirical way.

In 1931, James Truslow Adams published *The Epic of America*, a book which was originally called ‘The American Dream’. In the book, Adams described the term as a dream “of a better, richer, and happier life for all our citizens of every rank.” (Adams, viii)

Despite the Great Recession, or maybe because of it, Americans still shared a dream that they could succeed in many aspects of their life. According to David Kamp, this dream wasn’t necessarily related to money and material possessions; rather it was seen as “a set of deeply held ideals,” such as freedom, equality and democracy. Kamp also quotes F. D. Roosevelt’s definition of the “four essential human freedoms”:

“freedom of speech and expression”; “freedom of every person to worship God in his own way”; “freedom from want”; and “freedom from fear.” (Kamp 2)

After the WWII, the economy of the United States started to recover and many Americans could afford superior goods. This was connected to post-WWII baby boom, which re-shaped the concept of the American Dream. Couples with children felt obligation to financially provide for themselves and their children, thus the original vague triplet “better, richer, and happier” became a synonym for affluent. An ideal of then society was a middle-class family living “in a little house with a white picket fence,” (Goralka, web) preferably in a suburban area. According to Kamp, home ownership was “a new tenet of the American Dream”, along with “car ownership, television ownership and the intent to send one’s kids to college.” (Kamp 3) Richard Ruland and Malcolm Bradbury note that 1950s:

“was an age of materialism [...]; an era in which reality came increasingly to resemble unreality, when actuality frequently outpaced the writer's ability to image it and fiction needed to become superfiction to cope with an ever more fictional age of history.” (Ruland, Bradbury 371)

The shift from spiritual to material values has been largely criticised in the following years, eg. by the Beat Generation in the 1950s and the Hippie counterculture in the 1960s. The 1970s was an era of disillusionment for the counterculture, mainly due to the sense of ‘unfinished revolution’, which is depicted in *FLLV*.

In the 1980s, the American Dream became even greater myth than in the 1950s, as “nothing was ever enough. It compelled Americans to set unmeetable goals for themselves and then consider themselves failures when these goals, inevitably, went unmet.” (Kamp 4) The best illustration of then Dream are Yuppies⁸ who mistook Adam’s definition for extreme success and wealth.

According to Kerby Anderson, the downward tendency of the shared Dream continued in the 1990s. (Anderson, web) Many people, including Thompson, believe that the American Dream ended with George W. Bush’s election, in the early years of the 21st century. Thompson described it as the end of the American Century. (*AGW* 307, 2003)

⁸ Young Urban Professionals

5 Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas is comprised of two connected parts, each describing a different trip from Los Angeles to Las Vegas. The storyline is not particularly coherent, although the book is centered on two major themes: a definition of Gonzo journalism and the death of the American Dream.

5.1 Plot summary

The first part follows Raoul Duke, a journalist and the story's narrator, who has been assigned to cover the Mint 400, a desert race for motorcycles and dune-buggies. He asks his friend, a Samoan attorney, Dr. Gonzo to accompany him to Las Vegas, where the race is held. They rent a red Chevrolet convertible and fill its trunk with miscellaneous drugs, including LSD, cocaine, mescaline, and ether.

When they arrive to the Mint Hotel and Casino, where they are supposed to stay, even simple registration at the hotel's reception appears impossible to the pair, due to their intoxication. Duke hallucinates about reptiles, while Dr. Gonzo tries to regain control over himself.

The next morning, after a successful registration, Duke and Gonzo leave the hotel and move to the race. After the arrival, Duke instantly realizes that the exhaustive amount of dust and sand will make it impossible to cover the race. After a while, they decide to abandon both the race and the story, which leads them to series of bizarre, usually drug-related events, including a visit of Circus-Circus casino, or Dr. Gonzo's fierce encounter with bikers.

After a few days, Dr. Gonzo returns to Los Angeles and Duke assumes it would be best for him to depart as well, because of a large, unpaid bill for the room service. He attempts to escape unnoticed, but he is caught by a hotel clerk. Surprisingly, the clerk merely hands Duke a telegram from Dr. Gonzo. The telegram informs Duke about a new assignment for *Rolling Stone*. Because of an extensive drug use combined with a lack of sleep, Duke is unable to comprehend the message, initially, and decides to leave

without paying the bill. But the sense of guilt affects him on the way to Los Angeles. After several fearful hours, Duke contacts Dr. Gonzo, who repeatedly instructs him to stay in Las Vegas and locate him at hotel Flamingo, since they are supposed to attend the National District Attorneys Association's Conference on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs.

In the second part of the book, Duke registers to the hotel and discovers it is full of the Conference attendants, mainly cops. Duke, who is disconcerted by the encounter, then locates Dr. Gonzo in one of the rooms. To his surprise, Gonzo is accompanied by an unknown girl. Gonzo introduces her as Lucy and explains he met her at the airport, while she was running away from home. He offered her LSD and took her to the suite. Duke then confides to Gonzo, that Lucy might cause them trouble, for she have been drugged and possibly raped by the attorney.

Duke and Gonzo then contemplate their situation, and eventually decide to take advantage of the fact that Lucy is still under the influence of LSD. They transport her to another hotel and vanish. After they return to the suite, Dr. Gonzo persuades Duke to sample a new drug called Adrenochrome, which is supposedly extracted from adrenaline glands of a living human body. After he eats the drug, he experiences almost deadly moment of insanity.

A few days later, Duke and Gonzo attend the aforementioned Conference on Narcotics. They soon realize that the hosts and a majority of guest do not have the slightest idea about the drug culture and, quite ironically, that the prime examples of such culture are right among them.

The rest of the book is focused mainly on the search for the American Dream, undertaken by the main characters. After Gonzo's departure from the city, Duke is once again left alone. He recollects details about the previous events, tries to buy an ape, and finally leaves the city as well.

At the end of the story, Duke buys a box of amyls at the airport, cracks one of them under his nose and he finally feels relieved after all the fear he experienced.

5.2 The background story

In 1971, Thompson was occupied with writing an article for *Rolling Stone*, which concerned the murder of Rubén Salazar, a Mexican-American activist and journalist. Thompson collaborated on the research for the article with his friend Oscar Zeta Acosta, another Mexican-American activist.

At the same time, Thompson was assigned by *Sports Illustrated* to attend the Mint 400 race and produce “a 250-word copy block to go with a photo essay in the [*Sports Illustrated*] magazine.” (McKeen 158) Thompson and Acosta saw that as a great opportunity to discuss the article. However, during their stay, they “took a lot of drugs and ran amuck.” (McKeen 164)

When Thompson returned from Las Vegas he began writing the Salazar article, but, once again he was struggling with it. To relieve his stress, he edited his notes from Las Vegas, which evolved into a 2,500-word text. (Thompson b) Thompson attempted to offer the Vegas article to *Sports Illustrated*, but the magazine rejected it due to the fact that Thompson exceeded the 250-word limit.

Nevertheless, *Rolling Stone's* editors encouraged Thompson to persist in writing the story. Eventually, he connected two different journeys to Las Vegas by adding an intermezzo in Baker. William McKeen specifies the story's background: “Though the eventual work focused on two events that seem to come over the course of a long, nightmarish week, there was a month between the Mint 400 and the National District Attorney's Conference on Drug Abuse.” (McKeen 165)

The story was published in *Rolling Stone* as a two-part article and “was credited to Raoul Duke.” (McKeen 168) Thompson then decided to publish the article in the book form, using his real name, but the publication was postponed due to a threat of libel lawsuit by Oscar Zeta Acosta. Acosta, a proud Mexican-American, was mainly infuriated by the fact that Thompson portrayed Dr. Gonzo as Samoan. (McKeen 176)

5.3 Gonzo features in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*

FLLV had been described by Thompson as “a failed experiment in Gonzo Journalism.” He ascribes the failure to one important factor. Thompson’s stressed that the essential aspect of Gonzo storeis is that they are first drafts. His original idea with *FLLV* “was to buy a fat notebook and record the whole thing, as it happened, then send in the notebook for publication - without editing.” (Thompson b) In reality, Thompson had rewritten the book several times, before he eventually published it. (AGW 134, 1979)

However, the book offers other Gonzo features, that are examined in the following chapters.

5.3.1 Factuality vs Fiction

The question of *FLLV*’s factuality has been a frequent theme of interviews with Thompson, although his reactions does not actually reveal anything specific: “For reasons that should be perfectly obvious, I usually reply with a figure ranging anywhere from 60% to 80%.” (Thompson cit. in Cowan 49)

In an interview for *Spin Magazine*, Thompson likened *FLLV* to Truman Capote’s *In Cold Blood*, regarding the factuality of the book:

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas is a masterpiece. However, true Gonzo journalism as I conceive it should be rewritten. I would classify it, in Truman Capote’s words, as a ‘nonfiction novel’ in that almost all of it was true and did happen. I warped a few things, but it was a pretty accurate picture. [...] It is a very strange piece of reporting; at least it seems very strange now. Almost creepy and of course I would never do that kind of thing again. (AGW 176, 1993 intw.)

Later, he said the book was “so potentially incriminating that [he] would never claim it was 100% true.” (Thompson cit. in Cowan 49) The protection was one of the reasons why he used the alter egos, for himself and Acosta, and why he depicted Acosta as a 300 pound Samoan. (McKeen 167)

Another questionable aspect of the story is presented at its very beginning. Duke receives call from “some total stranger” (Thompson a⁹, 11), who instructs him to collect \$300 from an office in Beverly Hills and then travel to Las Vegas. However, Thompson was not given the assignment by a stranger. As stated in the previous chapter, he was sent to Las Vegas by *Sports Illustrated* to cover the race. Moreover, Thompson’s essay, which was originally meant to be printed on the *FLLV*’s dust jacket offers different version of the commencement of the journey: “I called Sports Illustrated - from the patio of the Polo Lounge - and said I was ready to do the [story].” Thompson simply exaggerated and enhanced the real story, to make it appear more Gonzo.

Probably the most controversial part of the book concerns Adrenochrome, a drug extracted from “The adrenaline glands from a living human body.” (Thompson a, 132) Thompson later admitted, he merely referred to the adrenaline he felt when he finished writing of a certain story: “What I was doing was taking what you normally feel from shooting adrenaline into the realm of the extremely weird.” (*AGW* 86, 1977)

One of the Gonzo features, which Thompson incorporated in *FLLV* is deceiving randomly selected people. It is best illustrated in *KDDD*: Thompson deludes a random man at the airport into thinking that the Kentucky Derby is going to be attacked by the members of Black Panthers. The man, who was up to this moment jolly and optimistic, suddenly falls into depression.

William McKeen describes it as “one of those scenes that made Hunter’s warier readers wonder about the ratio of fact to fiction in his reporting.” (McKeen 146) McKeen also notes that “saner events were left out of the story,” (McKeen 147) which was also the case of *FLLV*. It appears that Duke and Gonzo are constantly under the influence of drugs, but Thompson might have intentionally omitted some of the more sensible events.

An example of such behavior occurs upon Duke’s and Gonzo’s arrival to the Mint 400 desert race. Duke approaches a receptionist and pretends he on belongs to the team of Dr. Gonzo, whom he introduces as a contestant. Despite Gonzo was not informed about the act, he immediately accepts his role.

Throughout the book, Duke refers to himself as a doctor of journalism. (eg. Thompson a, 195) It is noteworthy that Thompson made the same statement several

⁹ THOMPSON, Hunter S. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: a savage journey to the heart of the American dream.*

times. Moreover, in the 1976 interview for *Loose Licks*, Thompson alleged that he is also a doctor of Gonzo journalism. (*AGW* 63)

In reality, Thompson was not a doctor of journalism, and obviously he was not a doctor of Gonzo journalism. He was merely a “doctor of divinity in the Missionary of the New Truth, one of the original faux religions. [...] And it was in this manner that Hunter S. Thompson became Doctor Hunter S. Thompson.” (Cowan 17)

In the book’s last chapter, when Duke buys a box of amyls, he acknowledges his actual status: “I located my Ecclesiastical Discount Card – which identifies me as a Doctor of Divinity, a certified Minister of the Church of the New Truth.” (Thompson a, 203)

Prior to his departure from Las Vegas, Duke attempts to buy an ape, but he discovers that the primate was taken away for attacking an old man at the bar. Bob Bone, Thompson’s friend from Puerto Rico, recalls a similar incident that happened in 1963. Thompson apparently travelled “with a drunk monkey in his jacket pocket. [...] The monkey eventually committed suicide, leaping into the air from the balcony of [Bone’s] tenth-floor apartment – we presumed a victim of the DTs¹⁰.” (Bone cit. in McKean 73) This tragicomic episode certainly proves Thompson’s statement that “some of the truth, that doesn’t get written is a lot more twisted than any of [his] fantasies.” (*AGW* 48, 1974)

5.3.2 Drugs and paranoia

Duke and Dr. Gonzo are frequently on the edge of insanity. One particular example is their visit of Circus-Circus. Duke’s fear of being imprisoned or even shot because of their conspicuous looks is a typical paranoid reaction caused by drugs, which is not dissimilar to symptoms of paranoid schizophrenia. “The bartender seemed to be watching us. Carson City, I thought. Twenty years.” (Thompson a, 50)

After the Circus-Circus episode, Duke recovers from the drug episode, but Dr. Gonzo’s paranoia persists. He gratuitously intimidates Duke with a hunting knife, which prompts Duke to retreat from the room. “One of the things you learn after dealing with drug people, is that everything is serious. You can turn your back on a person, but never turn your back on a drug – especially when it’s waving a razor-shape hunting knife in

¹⁰ Delirium tremens

your eyes.” (Thompson a, 56) Thompson later admitted he did not trust anyone: “I just never assume that anybody around me is anything but a potential menace. That goes for a lot of my best friends.” (AGW 104, 1977)

When Duke is leaving the Mint hotel, a clerk addresses him. At first, Duke thinks it’s just a hallucination and tries to ignore it: “No! I thought. I must be hallucinating. There’s nobody back there, nobody calling ... it’s a paranoid delusion, amphetamine psychosis ... just keep walking towards the car, always smiling.” (Thompson a, 75)

At this point, the clash between Duke and Thompson begins: “The clerk was still smiling. ‘This telegram just came for you,’ he said. ‘But actually it isn’t for you. It’s for somebody named Thompson, but it says ‘care of Raoul Duke’; does that make sense?’ [...] ‘I checked the register for this man Thompson. We don’t show him, but I thought he was part of your team.’” (Thompson a, 77)

Duke affirms that Thomopson is indeed a part of their team and he assures the clerk he will get the letter to Thopmson. On one hand, the confusion of the two identities might be just protection against possible consequences of Duke’s and Dr. Gonzo’s insane lifestyles. On the other hand, it might have been purposefully planned before, so that Thompson would stay at home, while Duke was unleashed.

In the penultimate chapter of the book, Duke realizes it is necessary to leave the city. The casino’s security guards enquire him about a photograph of him and Dr. Gonzo. He quickly convince the guards, it is not him, but “a guy named Thompson, [who] 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.” (Thompson a, 195) Here, the clash between Duke and Thompson reaches another level of absurdity since one’s alter ego mentions the original personality. However comical the situation might seem, Thompson’s writing definitely indicates the possibility of split personality disorder.

After the visit of Circus-Circus casino, Duke remarks that “right above the gambling tables the Forty Flying Carazito Brothers are doing a high-wire trapeze act, along with four muzzled Wolverines and the Six Nymphet Sisters from San Diego.” However, the players are so accustomed to such performance, they don’t even notice it. Thompson vividly describes the bizzare act:

“You’re down on the main floor playing blackjack, and the stakes are getting high when suddenly you chance to look up, and there, right smack above your head is a half-naked fourteen-year-old girl being

chased through the air by a snarling wolverine, which is suddenly locked in a death battle with two silver-painted Polacks who come swinging down from opposite balconies and meet in mid-air on the wolverine's neck[.]” (Thompson a, 46)

Considering Thompson's passion for psychedelic drugs and their intensive use, the Circus-Circus must have seemed an absolute nightmare, a place where “reality itself is too twisted”. (Thompson a, 47) “Hallucinations are bad enough” (Thompson a, 47) but if the real world is represented by a string of fantasy-like pictures, drugs are going to make the situation even more difficult to handle:

Vegas is so full of natural freaks – people who are genuinely twisted – that drugs aren't really a problem. [...] Psychedelics are almost irrelevant in a town where you can wander into a casino at any time of the day or night and witness the crucifixion of a gorilla – on a flaming neon cross that suddenly turns into a pinwheel, spinning the beast around in wild circles above the crowded gangling action. (Thompson a, 190)

The 11th chapter of the book's second part is a prime example of Thompson's seemingly drugged writing, as he develops various, but interconnected topics. He starts with a fear-ridden, paranoid, yet absurdly humorous contemplation of being chased by the authorities at distant parts of the Caribbean. In this part, Thompson alludes to his early years as a journalist, when he lived and worked in Puerto Rico. Then he focuses on the American Dream and considers various reasons that contributed to its death.

During an unusual moment of clarity, Duke ruminates about the role of drugs in his and Dr. Gonzo's lives: “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.” (Thompson a, 63)

Despite a heavy amount of drugs used in *FLLV*, Thompson did not take any drugs while writing the book. “Wild Turkey and tobacco are the only drugs I use regularly when I write.” (*AGW* 56, 1974) According to Morris Dickstein, the reason why *FLLV*, and other Thompson's texts appear to be written under the influence of drugs is that “Thompson learned to approximate the effect of mind-blasting drugs in his prose style.” (cit. in McKeen 194)

5.3.3 Technical aspect of Gonzo journalism

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas has been known for its peculiar storytelling. The story's narrative is frequently interrupted by Duke's thoughts and flashbacks, which are presented in stream of consciousness. William McKeen remarks that in *FLLV*, Thompson "adopted the conspirational just-between-the-two-of-us tone he came to use so often" (McKeen 73) and that he "began to write just like he talked." (McKeen 74)

Additionally, the book contains a selection of then news and reports, occasionally provided with Duke's annotations. Thompson later commented on this issue: "[Duke] was a vehicle for quotations that nobody else would say. That was me really, talking." (Thompson in *Fear and Loathing on the Road to Hollywood*) One of the annotations offers Thompson's distinctive opinion about journalism:

"Why bother with newspapers, if this is all they offer? Agnew was right. 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 a, 200)

FLLV includes one particularly exceptional chapter, prefaced with a fake editor's note. This technique was first used by Thompson in his column 'The Spectator', which appeared the Eglin Air Force Base newspaper *Command Courier*. (McKeen 27)

In *FLLV*, the fake editor's note is used for a different, more artistic purpose; to augment the book's authenticity. The supposed editor apologetically justifies Dr. Duke's unwillingness to co-operate on the book. Thus, Dr. Duke is again separated from Thompson and exists on his own. Thompson and Duke interchange their roles, which means that Thompson is merely Duke's assistant, recording the outrageous experience of his superordinate.

While the editor's note is undoubtedly fake, the rest of the chapter might be a transcription of the actual conversation. Thompson was known for his use of tape recorders while working on a story. (*AGW* 135, 1979) Much as the content of the chapter might seem questionable, the conversation itself develops naturally, yet it is possible Thompson edited it. However, due to his lazy nature and admitted inability to re-create the story (*AGW* 155, 1987) it is much more probable that the chapter once

again proves Thompson's conviction that truth is sometimes "a lot more twisted than any of [his] fantasies." (*AGW* 48, 1974)

Chris Harvey stresses one of the formal aspects of Tom Wolfe's texts: "[Wolfe] even played with ellipses, dots, dashes and exclamation points – attempting, he wrote, to leave the illusion of people thinking." (Harvey, web) It appears that Thompson used the same technique in *FLLV*. Ironically, he rewrote the book several times, so that it would read like an unedited, and thus gonzo, work.

5.4 Hunter S. Thompson vs. Raoul Duke

"He is a walking contradiction
partly truth and partly fiction"
- Kris Kristofferson
The Pilgrim, Chapter 33

After *FLLV*, Thompson's style became "so distinct it polarized his audience. Some loved it and, like junkies, wanted more of the Duke-and-Gonzo bad craziness. Other found it self-indulgent and left the room when Hunter's byline showed up." (McKeen 210) Many fans from the first group "were not interested in the event at all [...] but only in how the event affected their author." (McKeen 229) These uncritical fans "would have read an essay on sheep farming if it had a Hunter S. Thompson byline." (McKeen 221)

Thompson was often criticised for this; namely by Norman Mailer, who complained that Thompson's fans "were too easily pleased and would accept anything from their man." (cit. in McKeen 229) It was apparent that Thompson's avid fans contributed to the cult status he later achieved.

However, there was also a dark side of becoming a celebrity. Ralph Steadman referred to Thompson as becoming "a prisoner of his own cult." (cit. in McKeen 232) In 1974, a new character named Uncle Duke was introduced into Garry Trudeau's *Doonesbury* comic strip. Uncle Duke was "a balding, aviator-shade-wearing *Rolling Stone* writer who hallucinated that he was seeing bats." (McKeen 231)

Thompson was irritated by the fact that he "had been turned into a cartoon character" (McKeen 231) without being asked. This led to an embarrassing scene, for he

was not aware of the comic initially, when a group of strangers suddenly started “pointing at [him] and laughing.” (AGW 81, 1977)

The comic strips and their impact not only annoyed Thompson, but they also contributed to his paranoia. It was quite ironic, yet logical, that despite being the centre of attention in his writing, Thompson needed anonymity as a journalist. The comic strip deprived him of this advantage and he, once again, got the Fear. “Though harmless on its surface, the *Doonesbury* strips were so close to Hunter’s bone that he wondered whether someone was spying on him.” (McKeen 246)

Thompson commented on this issue in 1977, during a lecture at the University of Colorado: “It robs me of a very valuable human part of my life, which is, the progress you assume.” (AGW 98) In an interview for *T.O. Magazine*, in 1986, he admitted he has “become quite self-conscious about including [his] personal life in [his] writing.” (AGW 144) In the same interview, when asked about his retreat from Gonzo journalism, Thompson noted it is no longer fun “when you realize that any small thing you might do could turn up in *Doonesbury* the next morning[.]” (AGW 145)

According to Douglas Brinkley, *Doonesbury* was the reason why Thompson “became more of a hermit the last thirty years. He was one of the hottest writers in the country, then the comic strip came along, and that humiliated him. He would have been a different guy without that comic strip.” (cit. in McKeen 293)

Thompson eventually started to appreciate *Doonesbury*, or rather have “gotten used to it.” (AGW 139, 1980) In a 1993 interview for the *Spin Magazine*, he commented on the matter in a particularly mellow and humorous way:

It hasn’t helped a lot to be a savage comic-book character for the last 15 years – a drunken screwball who should’ve been castrated a long time ago. The smart people in the media knew it was a weird exaggeration. The dumb ones took it seriously and warned their children to stay away from me at all costs. The really smart ones understood it was only a censored, kind of a toned-down children’s version of the real thing. (AGW 179)

5.5 The American Dream

Hunter S. Thompson had been obsessed with the American Dream almost his whole adult life. He included some of his observations on the Dream and its supposed death in his works but never completed a comprehensive text concerning the topic.

In 1967, after the publication of Thompson's debut, *Hell's Angels*, he and Jim Silberman contemplated publishing another nonfiction book by Thompson. He was supposed to write "some hazy polemic on the topic 'The Death of the American Dream'." (McKeen 114) Given the vagueness of the term, Thompson struggled to write a coherent text:

"What was it? Was it Horatio Alger, rags to riches, the idea that you could start with nothing and end up rolling naked in the stacks of hundreds? Or was it a dream of freedom? Personal freedom ... or the concept of freedom that the founders brought into the world? [...] Whatever the Dream would ultimately turn out to be, Hunter knew it would be political." (McKeen 118)

5.5.1 A series of unfortunate events

The assassination of John Fitzgerald Kennedy was a first wound to the weakened American Dream. For many Americans, John F. Kennedy represented a possibility of reaching the American Dream; whatever it really meant. Fifteen years after the assassination, Thompson noted that during John Kennedy's presidency, "there was the feeling that he really was going to do something, and it was kind of nice to be an American." (*AGW* 121, 1978) Even today, J. F. Kennedy is still perceived as a symbol of change; a man who never got the chance to prove his good intentions.

Thompson reacted immediately with a letter to the writer and journalist William Kennedy. In the letter he wrote:

"I'm afraid to sleep for fear of what I might learn when I wake up. There is no human being within 900 miles to whom I can communicate anything – much less the fear and loathing that is on me after today's murder. ... I want to kill because I cannot talk." (cit. in McKeen 86)

The letter not only documents Thompson's growing skepticism about the USA's future but it also contains the first use of 'fear and loathing'; a phrase that would

pervade Thompson's future work and life. The phrase is believed to be Thompson's version of 'Fear and Trembling', which was coined by Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard. (Willhite, web) For Thompson, 'Fear and Loathing' represented "a certain state, an attitude." (*AGW* 234, 1997)

In 1968, Thompson faced a difficult decision between two presidential candidates. Lyndon Johnson, was seen by Thompson as a two-faced president, as he promised peaceful solution of the Vietnam War, but de facto practiced the exact opposite. According to McKeen, Thompson originally intended to vote against Johnson, but quickly changed his mind when he realized that then president's opponent was Richard Nixon. (McKeen 118)

Thompson considered Nixon "the national boogeyman" (*AGW* 50, 1974) and "a monument to all the bad genes and broken chromosomes that have queered the reality of the 'American Dream'." (cit. in McKeen 120)

As he wasn't able to choose one of the two main candidates, he realized, that covering Nixon's campaign would be an unique opportunity to explore the American Dream topic. Moreover, Thompson was also a supporter of Robert Kennedy, and he believed that Nixon would loose to Kennedy. Considering Thompson's dislike of Nixon, he thought it would be exciting to "spend a couple of weeks following Nixon around and then write his political obituary." (*AGW* 49, 1974) Later, Thompson came to conclusion that traveling with Nixon was "a nightmare of bullshit, intrigue and suspicion." (cit. in McKeen 122)

On April 1968, Americans were horrified by an assassination of Martin Luther King, a peaceful leader of the African-American Civil Rights Movement. The killing led to riots in Chicago and other US cities, during the Democratic Convention. These riots were later largely criticised for the police brutality. Thompson, who visited Chicago during these riots, was clubbed by the police along with other journalists and innocent bystanders. (McKeen 124) The event aggrieved Thompson and also intensified his hatred toward authorities. Despite his egocentrism, Thompson felt deeply connected with American society and even weeks after the incident "he couldn't talk about [it] without crying." (McKeen 125)

In a 1974 interview for *Playboy*, Thompson recalled that immediately after the Chicago Democratic Convention he felt the urge to “get into politics – if only in self-defense.” (AGW 42)

Two months after the Martin Luther King’s assassination, Robert Kennedy was killed “after winning the California primary.” (McKeen 123) The event disheartened Thompson who “had admired Bobby Kennedy as he did few other human beings”, and it was even more troubling for him, due to a “contradiction in his character”; being a pacifist on the one hand and gun enthusiast on the other. (McKeen 127)

More than 30 years later, Thompson commented on the issue in an interview for *George Magazine*:

The JFK murder had a huge effect on me and a lot of other people of that generation. And then you got Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King. It was a generation that was having all its leaders murdered right in front of their eyes. And that’s why 1968 stands out in my mind as maybe the worst and weirdest year than anything I can remember in history. (AGW 281, 2001)

Thompson thought that “America in the early 1960s was too interesting, [...] and writing fiction seemed like self-indulgent literary masturbation.” (McKeen 86) Therefore, he concentrated on developing his characteristic style of journalism.

Yet, even four years after the agreement with Silberman, Thompson was still not able to compile the book. Consequently, he used his notes on the American Dream’s death in *FLLV*.

5.6 The American Dream in *FLLV*

Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas was published in a book form in 1972 and its subtitle, *A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*, reveals quite a lot about the book’s theme.

In the book, Thompson and Acosta, or Duke and Gonzo, believe they will discover the real nature of the American Dream in Las Vegas, although they are uncertain where to begin with their search. Nevertheless, upon their arrival to the city, it is apparent, the whole Las Vegas is a one big American Dream; an amalgam of both positive and negative connotations of the great myth.

5.6.1 The end of an era

Thompson repeatedly referred to *FLLV* as an epitaph for the 1960s. “The ’60s was like an attitude more than anything else. [...] In the ’70s, it was a different period. The ’70s is really the people that survived the ’60s.” (*AGW* 195, 1996)

During Dr. Gonzo’s particularly depressing, even suicidal LSD experience, Duke reminisces about San Francisco in the 1960s:

“San Francisco in the middle sixties was a very special time and place to be a part of. Maybe it meant something. Maybe not, in the long run. ... but no explanation, no mix of words or music or memories can touch that sense of knowing that you were there and alive in that corner of time and the world. Whatever it meant. [...] History is hard to know, because of all that hired bullshit, but even without being sure of ‘history’ it seems entirely reasonable to think that every now and then the energy of a whole generation comes to a head in a long fine flash, for reasons that nobody really understands at the time – and which never explain, in retrospect, what actually happened.” (Thompson a, 66-67)

The following passage has been recognized as one of the most excellent Thompson’s texts. Duke/Thompson expands on the flashback of San Francisco in the 1960s:

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.” (Thompson a, 67-68)

In another chapter, Thompson ruminates about the exact moment when the idealised era suddenly ended by asking a rhetorical question: “what is sane? Especially here in ‘our own country’ – in this doomstruck era of Nixon. We are all wired into a survival trip now. No more of the speed that fueled the Sixties. Uppers are going out of style.” (Thompson a, 178)

Later he openly expresses his abiding antipathy to Nixon by comparing his presidency to Downers, which are also known as depressants., e.g. Barbiturates. (PreventionLane, web)

“The popularity of psychedelics has fallen off [...] The big market, these days, is in downers [...] whatever Fucks You Up – whatever short-circuits your brain and ground it for the longest possible time.” [...] and it is worth noting, historically, that downers came in with Nixon.” (Thompson a, 201-202)

Timothy Leary was another person that had been repeatedly criticised by Thompson. In *FLLV*, Leary and his followers are disparaged for their belief that “they could buy Peace and Understanding for three bucks a hit” (Thompson a, 178). Thompson reproaches them and other followers of self-proclaimed gurus for their blind faith in an imaginary force that tends “that Light at the end of the tunnel.” (Thompson a, 179)

After Dr. Gonzo’s first departure from Las Vegas, Duke stays in the suite and experiences his usual, paranoid and self-analytical state of mind. His notes during the depressive experience are filled with sarcasm towards idealised America. “Sympathy? Not for me. No mercy for a criminal freak in Las Vegas. This place is like the Army: the shark ethic prevails – eat the wounded. In a closed society where everybody’s guilty, the only crime is getting caught. In a world of thieves, the only final sin is stupidity.” (Thompson a, 72) In this paragraph, Thompson describes his general view of then American politics. Moreover, the last sentence could be clearly deemed a prophecy of the Watergate scandal.

Thompson mentioned Nixon in an article, which was written in 1972, before the publication of *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and was supposed to be included on the book’s dust jacket: “Four more years of Nixon means four more years of John Mitchell—and four more years of Mitchell means another decade or more of bureaucratic fascism that will be so entrenched, by 1976, that nobody will feel up to fighting it.” (Thompson b)

Thompson must have been greatly disappointed by Nixon’s reelection. But the Watergate scandal, which Thompson described as “the most complete and hideous disgrace in the history of American politics,” (*AGW* 51, 1974) followed by Nixon’s resignation in 1974, revived Thompson’s belief in a better future. In his own words:

“[We] really had an illusion of power – the illusion of being in charge. Which was quite liberating.” (AGW 199, 1996) As stated in the theoretical part; liberty, or freedom, is an essential part of the American Dream and one of the most important American values, so Nixon’s resignation appeared as a resurrection of the myth.

However optimistic it might then seem, Thompson and many other Americans quickly realized it was just illusion; they had been misled, once more. Thompson reminisced about the subject in a 2003 interview for *Boulder Weekly*: “During Watergate – but not for long after it – I really believed it was the beginning of a new era for American journalism. [...] I thought we were going to develop a new generation of journalism and I’m still baffled at what happened.” (AGW 345)

In the same interview, Thompson pondered what had been the exact moment of the American Dream’s death:

“Everything seems to lead back to 1980 to the real beginning of the downfall of America. Living in this country is gonna be a different experience from now on, and nobody’s gonna know or much less remember at all what it was like to live in the ’60s or ’70s. That was a very special 20-year period, and then 1980 to 2000 was a downhill slide.” (AGW 345)

5.6.2 Raoul Duke vs Horatio Alger

Thompson first mentions Horatio Alger at the beginning of the story, when Las Vegas still appears to be a city of unlimited possibilities. The following quotation illustrates how Thompson/Duke regards himself as a drug-ridden reincarnation of Horatio Alger: “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.”

In the end of the book, Duke visits Circus-Circus again and talks with Bruce Innes, a friend who was going to sell him an ape. Duke admits he is going to leave the city soon, because he has found everything he needed. Bruce is surprised and asks him if he found the American Dream. Duke nods and explains they are “sitting on the main nerve right now.” He reminds Bruce a story about the manager of Circus-Circus, who always wanted to “run away and join the circus when he was a kid.” Bruce understands

immediately, saying “the bastard now has his own circus, and a license to steal, too.” Duke adds he is “pure Horatio Alger, all the way down to his attitude.” (Thompson a, 191)

Thompson made references to Horatio Alger in several works preceding *FLLV*, namely in an article “Living in the Time of Alger, Greeley, Debs”, which was published in *National Observer* in 1964 and concerns itinerant workers. Thompson describes them as “people who never got the message that rugged individualism has made some drastic adjustments in these hyper-organized times. They are still living in the era of Horace Greeley, Horatio Alger and in some cases, Eugene Debs. They want no part of ‘city living,’ but they have neither the education nor the interest to understand why it is ever more difficult for them to make a living ‘out here in the open.’” (Thompson c¹¹)

Another allusion to Horatio Alger appears in “The Temptations of Jean-Claude Killy,” which was published in *Scanlan’s Monthly* in 1970. In the article, the retired skier is compelled by his contract, to sell Chevrolets: “when you sell Chevrolets in America you honor the myths and mentality of the marketplace: You smile like Horatio Alger and give all the credit to Mom and Dad, who never lost faith in you and even mortgaged their ingots when things got tough.” (Thompson c)

5.6.3 Las Vegas and the American Dream

The American Dream is not frequently mentioned throughout the book, but serves mainly as an underlying base for Thompson and Acosta, testing the possibilities of Las Vegas, as well as limits of their personal freedom.

There is, however, a ninth chapter in the book’s second part, in which The American Dream is discussed in a more explicit manner. The whole chapter is written as a verbatim transcription of an interview between Duke, Dr. Gonzo, waitress and a cook in a fast food restaurant. It starts with the aforementioned fake editor’s note, written by Thompson himself, which introduces and justifies following events: “The rationale for the following transaction appears to be based on a feeling – shared by both Duke and his attorney – that the American Dream would have to be sought out

¹¹ THOMPSON, Hunter S. *The Great Shark Hunt: strange tales from a strange time*. [online]

somewhere far beyond the dreary confines of the District Attorney's Conference on Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs." (Thompson a, 161)

Duke and The Attorney then ask the fast food employees for the direction to the American Dream. The Attorney explains they are looking for the American Dream and that it is supposed to be somewhere in the Las Vegas Area. Afterwards he notes "it's a silly story to do, but that's what [they] get paid for." (Thompson a, 165) This seems as another caustic remark about misunderstood characteristic of the American Dream; to get rich, no matter what.

The waitress and the cook, who believe it is an actual place directs them to the old Psychiatrist's Club, a former discotheque place. The cook also remarks that "the only people who hang out there is a bunch of pushers, peddlers, uppers and downers[.]" (Thompson a, 165)

When Duke and Dr. Gonzo finally arrive to the club, they find out it is "a huge slab of cracked, scorched concrete in a vacant lot full of tall weeds." (Thompson a, 168) Later, they are told "the place had burned down about three years ago". (Thompson a, 168) It is obviously a derisive remark about the actual condition of the American Dream.

Duke believes that the Las Vegas' American Dream is bilateral and associated with money. On the one hand it represents a "vision of the Big Winner somehow emerging from the last-minute pre-dawn chaos of a stale Vegas casino." (Thompson a, 57) "For a loser," on the other hand, "Vegas is the meanest town on earth." (Thompson a, 42)

Duke is outraged by corruption and greed that is present in the American psyche. It is best illustrated when he returns the red Chevrolet convertible and rents another car, despite his credit card has been already canceled: "The only bedrock rule is Don't Burn the Locals. Beyond that, nobody cares. They would rather not know. If Charlie Manson checked into the Sahara tomorrow morning, nobody would hassle him as long as he tipped big." (Thompson a, 106) Nonetheless, it is relatively hypocritical of Duke to deceive a rental company and then criticize Las Vegas, and practically the whole United States, for apathy and money-oriented mentality.

Thompson supposed that the American Dream is reachable exclusively by Americans. His notion to Acosta is a prime example of this : "You Samoans are all the

same, you have no faith in the essential decency of the white man's culture." (Thompson a, 11). Later in the book, he claims that "[their trip] was a classic affirmation of everything right and true and decent in the national character" and that it "was a gross, physical salute to the fantastic possibilities of life in this country." He also adds that "[his] attorney understood this concept, despite his racial handicap." (Thompson a, 18) Although these remarks are undoubtedly ironic in tone, a slight flash of Thompson's racial prejudices is visible. It is possible that Thompson's racism had its roots in his Southern origin, which was illustrated by Paul Semonin, who was called a "Nigger Boy" by Thompson due to his "interest in the African people and culture" (McKeen 79,80)

Thompson also commented on this aspect of his personality by using an overstatement: "I'm a bigot. I'm what they called a 'multibigot.' ... A unibigot is a racist. A multibigot is just a prick." (cit. in McKeen 273)

Another example of xenophobia and the dark side of patriotism is presented near the end of the book. Thompson includes a story about himself, his friend Bruce Innes and a former Astronaut, whose name was "deleted at insistence of publisher's lawyer." (Thompson a, 192) Considering the fake editor's note, there was clearly no pressure to delete the name and Thompson once again tried to confuse the readers.

Nevertheless, Innes has just ended his set in an Aspen club and joined Thompson's table. The Astronaut supposedly came to them and started yelling at Innes: "'What kind of nerve does a goddamn Canadian have to come down here and insult this country?'" (Thompson a, 192) Thompson defends his friend, but then he tells the Astronaut, that "'if there's one thing [he hates] in this world, it's a goddamn bonehead Polack.'" (Thompson a, 192)

In this scene, Thompson shows that he does not support prejudices based on one's nationality, yet on the same page, he reveals his bias against the Polish people. While, he might have merely wanted to infuriate the Astronaut, his remark proves that Thompson was indeed "a walking contradiction" (Kristofferson).

Similar degree of hypocrisy could be perceived in Duke's reminiscence about a particularly outrageous event which took place before Dr. Gonzo's departure. It involves the main characters and a maid from the Flamingo hotel. Duke and Dr. Gonzo have destroyed their room to such extent it looks "like the site of some disastrous

zoological experiment involving whiskey and gorillas,” (Thompson a, 180). The maid starts to tremble “with fear and confusion”, as she approaches the naked attorney, who is “vomiting into his shoes” (Thompson a, 181). The both men then manipulate the maid into thinking they are cops and offer her a false job for the police. They tell her not to enter the room anymore and also threaten her with jail if she tells anyone about the encounter.

This event exposes ambiguity of the abstract Fear, an emotion shared by both Duke and Dr. Gonzo while they explore the dark side of the Las Vegas dream. In this case, their Fear is transferred on the maid, which might symbolize the vicious circle of bad energy. It is however difficult to determine whether Duke and Dr. Gonzo have been infected by the Fear in Las Vegas or the atmosphere of the city just contributed to their previous condition. There are hints in Thompson’s earlier works that affirms the latter hypothesis. For instance, he once admitted that Louisville, his hometown, was “grey and wet and full of so many ghosts and memories that [he got] the Fear whenever [he went] outside.” (cit. in McKeen 67)

It is then presumable, that Las Vegas does not constitute all of the misrepresented American values, but rather it merely exposes deeply hidden vices of the main characters. Which signifies that, eventually, Duke’s/Thompson’s principal enemy was not only Las Vegas and the idealised American Dream, but primarily himself.

6 Conclusion

Hunter S. Thompson's Gonzo journalism represents a unique version of the New journalism. Thompson, who discovered Gonzo writing somewhat accidentally, was the only genuine Gonzo journalist. Despite numerous attempts by then and today's journalists, his style has remained unparalleled in terms of journalistic subjectivity. The reason for his incomparability lies in a simple fact: Hunter S. Thompson not only wrote Gonzo but he also lived Gonzo in many ways.

He focused on his worst habits and transformed them into the best qualities of Gonzo journalism. Therefore, his inability to finish the story on deadline became the no-rewrites Gonzo principle; the extensive drug use contributed to a dreamlike, distorted rendition of reality; and his peculiar, and often cruel, sense of humor was utilized to deceive random people.

A lot of people consider Thompson to be 'the crazy druggie who was portrayed by Johnny Depp in *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*'. While these notions are true to some extent, they are also shallow and generalizing. Considerably fewer people know, that Thompson was also a brilliant political commentator. Due to his deeply rooted patriotism, he felt compelled to express his aversion to the United States' politicians, mainly to the Republicans.

Both the Gonzo features and the disillusionment with the USA politics are depicted in Thompson's essential work; a novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. Thompson described *FLLV* as a failed experiment in Gonzo journalism. According to him, Gonzo stories should be presented as they were written, which means without rewrites or even a correction of typos. (*AGW* 176, 1993) However, the book is considered an epitome of Gonzo journalism, as the other features of the style are greatly illustrated in the book.

FLLV is also regarded by many experts as an epitaph for the 1960s and as a pivotal work on the death of the American Dream. These two themes resonate through the whole book, and they are often reflected in the main characters' activities. Thompson admitted the book "was kind of a weird celebration for an era that [he] figured was ending." (*AGW* 89, 1977) And in accordance with such claim, he and

Acosta were diligent in doing so. They “abused every rule Vegas lived by – burning the locals, abusing the tourists, terrifying the help.” (Thompson a, 173)

However their last attempt to revive a seemingly ideal era of the 1960s proved futile, for the majority of society had already begun accepting consumerism as a new version of the American Dream. Yet, their struggle remains recorded for future generations as an evidence, that we might be already living a dream, but our desperate efforts to preserve the spirit of a certain era prevent us from realizing this.

Resumé

Tato práce se zabývá rozbořem díla *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*¹² amerického spisovatele, novináře a politického komentátora Hunter S. Thompsona. Cílem práce je analýza typických vlastností Gonzo žurnalistiky, které se objevují v této knize. Práce se dále soustředí na téma Amerického snu. Oba jevy jsou popsány v samostatných kapitolách a následně rozebrány v praktické části.

Jelikož je Thompson zařazován mezi tzv. Nové žurnalisty, objevuje se v teoretické části podrobnější seznámení s tímto hnutím, především z technického a historického hlediska.

Nový žurnalismus, mezi jehož hlavní představitele patří např. Tom Wolfe, Gay Talese, nebo Truman Capote, se zrodil v Americe, v 60. letech 20. století, jako reakce na schematickou podobu klasických reportáží, ve kterých převládala objektivita a suchá fakta. Pro Nové žurnalisty sloužila fakta, jako základ k vytvoření celistvých příběhů s realistickými dialogy, detaily každodenního života a plastickými postavami.

Tyto reportáže, ve kterých převládala subjektivita, připomínaly spíše povídky, tedy žánr spojovaný především s literární fikcí. Z tohoto důvodu byli autoři často napadáni; kritici jim vyčítali, že si příběhy a dialogy vymýšlejí. Přesto si tento žánr získal popularitu mezi lidmi, kteří věřili, že prvky fikce slouží k přesnějšímu a pravdivějšímu vyličení událostí. Poměrně ironický je fakt, že Thompsonova extrémní verze Nového žurnalistiky, tedy Gonzo žurnalistiky, byl vytvořen jako pokus o odlišení se od této skupiny autorů.

Přesto je vznik Gonzo žurnalistiky víceméně dílem náhody. Thompson byl známý nejen svým častým a intenzivním užíváním drog, ale také svou neochotou k dodržení deadline, tedy posledního termínu odevzdání textu. Několik dní před odevzdáním jedné ze svých reportáží Thompson zjistil, že kromě několika poznámek v sešitu nemá napsanou ani stránku. Nakonec napsal několik stran, ale jak se uzávěrka blížila, vzdal to a začal do časopisu, který mu reportáž zadal, posílat očíslované stránky ze svého sešitu. Předpokládal, že ho čtenáři i kritika kvůli lajdáckému přístupu zcela zavrhnou, ale opak byl pravdou. Lidé byli nadšení a spousta z nich považovala článek za průkopnický. Bill Cardoso, jeden z Thompsonových přátel, poté o článku řekl, že je

¹² dále jen *FLLV*; česky vyšlo jako *Strach a svrab v Las Vegas*

Gonzo. Ačkoliv má toto slovo mnoho významů a jeho původ je nejistý, dalo by se volně přeložit jako „úmyslně šílený“.

Tento žurnalistický žánr se vyznačuje subjektivním přístupem k faktům a nejasným rozdílem mezi realitou a fikcí. Tato rozpolcenost je způsobena jednak zmiňovanými drogami, a jednak samotnou povahou reality, která dle autorových slov často působí šílenějším dojmem, než fikce. Gonzo žurnalismus tak nepřímo podněcuje čtenáře, aby pochopil, že vše co je vydáváno za obecnou, ověřitelnou pravdu, může být pravdou ryze subjektivní.

Dalším znakem tohoto žánru je absence korektur, tzn. že první verze článku je považována za definitivní. Právě tato technika nebyla použita při psaní *FLLV*. Právě proto Thompson popsal knihu jak nepovedený Gonzo experiment. Přesto, že sám autor knihu nepovažoval za Gonzo žurnalismus, je paradoxně často vyzdvižována, jako zářný příklad tohoto žánru. Důvodem pro toto nedorozumění je fakt, že kromě pozdějších úprav, kniha splňuje všechny náležitosti pro zařazení mezi Gonzo práce.

Hlavním hrdinou *FLLV* je sám autor, skrývající se pod pseudonymem Raoul Duke. Zápletka této knihy je velice nestabilní; je často narušována myšlenkovými pochody hlavního hrdiny, např. vzpomínkami, či glosami tehdejších novinových článků, které jsou v knize přetištěny. K úplnému a správnému pochopení příběhu je proto nezbytné vyličit okolnosti jeho vzniku.

V roce 1967, po publikaci svého prvního románu *Hell's Angels*, přijal Thompson nabídku od svého vydavatele k napsání knihy na téma „smrt amerického snu“. Thompson si s obecným tématem nevěděl příliš rady. Přesto, že události v následujících letech, jako např. zavraždění Martina Luthera Kinga a bratrů Kennedyů, Thompsona inspirovaly k psaní, vždy se jednalo jen o poznámky, nikoliv o souvislou práci.

V roce 1971 pracoval Thompson spolu se svým přítelem Oscarem Zeta Acostou na výzkumu ke svému článku, pojednávajícím o vraždě mexicko-amerického novináře a aktivisty Rubéna Salazara. V ten samý rok získal Thompson zakázku od časopisu *Sports Illustrated*. Šlo o napsání krátké anotace o 250ti slovech, která by doplňovala fotografie z pouštního motocyklového závodu Mint 400, jež se konal v Las Vegas. Thompson pochopil, že závod by byl dokonalou záminkou k odjezdu z Los Angeles, kde se odehrála Salazarova vražda a kde prováděl zmíněný výzkum. Thompson požádal Acostu, aby ho na cestě doprovodil, s tím že během pobytu v Las Vegas proberou

detaily vztahující se k článku o Salazarovi. Acosta souhlasil, ovšem pod podmínkou, že se oba zaopatří dostatečným množstvím drog. A tak vlastně začíná i příběh knihy, kde Thompson vystupuje jako Raoul Duke a Acosta jako Dr. Gonzo.

FLLV se skládá ze dvou částí, z nichž každá popisuje jiný výlet do Las Vegas. První z nich zahrnuje zmiňovanou zakázku od *Sports Illustrated* a druhá se týká jiné zakázky od časopisu *Rolling Stone*, v rámci níž měli Thompson a Acosta navštívit konferenci o narkotikách a nebezpečných drogách. Thompson poté oba příběhy propojil (pravděpodobně fiktivním) intermezzem v Nevadské vesnici Baker.

Knihy vlastně nedisponuje souvislým příběhem, spíše útržkovitě popisuje různé, povětšinou s drogami související zážitky hlavních protagonistů. Thompson vidí Las Vegas jako místo, kde se realita mísí s fikcí a v kombinaci s halucinogeny se mění v jednu velkou noční můru. Thompsona ovšem v Las Vegas pronásledovala také myšlenka na stále odkládanou knihu o smrti americkém snu. A kde jinde by našel lepší inspiraci pro toto téma než v korupci a mamonem prolezlém Las Vegas. Část svých poznámek proto použil v *FLLV*.

Americký sen představoval pro Thompsona jakýsi nedostižný mýtus a zabýval se jím celý svůj dospělý život, přestože knihu, která by pojednávala pouze o tomto tématu však nikdy nedokončil.

Tato myšlenka o lepším, bohatším a šťastnějším životě, jak ji v roce 1931 definoval James Truslow Adams, má dlouhou tradici a vlastně přišla do Ameriky spolu s Puritány. Americký sen je spojen s osobním růstem a s možností, že každý jedinec se může dostat na pomyslný vrchol, a to bez ohledu na pohlaví, rasu či sociální status. Velkým paradoxem amerického snu, jak ho uvádí Jim Cullen, bylo, že sami Puritáni byli deterministé, tzn. že nevěřili na možnost řídit vlastní osud.

Tato obecná představa o lepším a bohatším životě se v 50. letech 20. století začala spojovat s majetností a hmotnými statky. Tehdejším ideálem bylo finanční zajištění rodiny a vlastní dům s bílým, špičatým plotem. Tehdejší mentalitu ostře kritizovali spisovatelé z Beat generation, z něhož vycházel například i Thompson, a v šedesátých letech je doplnili Hippies. Americký sen se postupně stále více soustředil na materiální hodnoty, což vyvrcholilo v 80. letech, s nástupem Yuppies, tedy mladých businessmanů, kteří považovali stoupání na společenském žebříčku za smysl svého života.

FLLV se ovšem soustředí na léta sedmdesátá, především na nedokončenou revoluci, kterou v 60. letech odstartovala alternativní kultura v čele s Hippies. Kniha tak vlastně představuje jakousi poctu této generaci, ať už jde o nadměrné užívání drog hlavních postav, či Thompsonovy nostalgické vzpomínky na právě končící éru. Hledání amerického snu tak v této knize symbolizuje spíše představu ideální společnosti, než hromadění majetku. V jedné z klíčových kapitol této knihy popisuje Thompson své zážitky ze San Francisca v 60. letech, kdy se vnitřní síla alternativní kultury jevila jako nezlomná a všeobjímající. I přes hrůzy války ve Vietnamu (nebo právě kvůli nim) se zdálo, jako by všichni drželi pohromadě a směřovali za lepší budoucností. Ovšem s příchodem 70. let přišlo vystřízlivění jak z drog a alkoholu, tak z naivních představ o světlejších zítřcích. Thompson přirovnává sílu této generace k vlně, která mířila tím správným směrem, aby se nečekaně odrazila a odplula zase zpátky, odkud vzešla.

Přesto se dá kniha vykládat i jiným, pro Thompsona možná méně příznivým způsobem. Vzhledem k tomu, že hlavní hrdinové jsou většinu času pod vlivem různorodých drog, není velkým překvapením, že jejich stavy často hraničí až s paranoidní schizofrenií. Zvrácený lasvegaský sen o úspěchu tak nakonec může být pouze odrazem jejich vlastního podvědomí. Takže si možná ani neuvědomují, že svým chováním přispívají k rozpadu onoho nedostižného amerického snu.

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Abbreviations used in this paper:

FLLV – *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*

KDDD – *The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved*

AGW – *Ancient Gonzo Wisdom*, interviews with Hunter S. Thompson (edited by Anita Thompson)