

James Campion Interview – On Hunter Thompson & Gonzo Journalism: It’s Legitimacy, Legacy & Future

Conducted at the Museum Tavern, Bloomsbury, London by an Oxford Journalism Student - 11/05

What do you believe is the role of a journalist?

To communicate information as accurately as possible, capturing the mood, nature, and consequence of the event. More or less.

What do you think HST’s purpose was for writing?

Well, he said it was fear, because he couldn’t do anything else. This I understand and respect. Know your limits, that’s what I say, and I think Hunter, who was fantastically self-aware, would concur. Hell, he lived his life accordingly. It’s not for us to judge. As he quoted, I think, Faulkner or D.H. Lawrence pretty frequently, “I’d run over my grandmother to finish a book.” Something like that. As I wrote in *Deep Tank Jersey*, you cannot judge a person for dealing with his/her surroundings anyway they can. Hunter’s a writer, and for the sake of the Christ, with that comes incredible urges. I think the urges aided him in the craft and doomed him to the rest of society. This is why he wrote, and why really, anyone writes, to avoid the doom. This also makes him a prime candidate to express the reality of doom, which confronts the journalist at every turn. And then, of course, there are deadlines. Let’s steer clear of that subject.

How important is subjectivity to journalism? And why?

I hate to spin off all my answers into a cloudy array of quotations, but I think it was McGovern’s campaign manager, Frank Mankiewicz who said that Hunter’s reporting in *Fear & Loathing on the Campaign Trail* was “the least factual but most accurate account of the events surrounding that campaign.”

Now, remember, journalism deals in accuracies, not facts. Facts tend to be swayed by those who use them for their own gain, and have little to nothing to do with the swirl and cause of events. Facts, like statistics, are damned lies, or some other cruel Mark Twain quote. But enough of the quotes; remember the accuracy. Serve the accuracy in journalism and you will get work. Deal with facts and you will be relegated to the hump work of historian. Historians judge the accuracies of the accounts depicted by journalists of the time and derive facts from them. Hunter was about the accuracy. And he also said that to be objective is to not be “in” the story. Objectivity, Hunter once mused, led to monsters like Nixon taking over the White House. To cover Nixon, Hunter believed, you had to be fiercely subjective. That is where subjects like Nixon lived.

What is the value of experience? Should the journalist be free from experience in order to gain an unbiased view?

Again, I would say no, and since you’re asking about Hunter Thompson’s place in it and

the force known as Gonzo Journalism, which he not only invented, but I believe was its sole practitioner, then the answer must lean to the side of experience. This is why they drag sorry has-beens from war, like these generals acting as experts on TV during the Iraq War coverage. This is why the opinion or observations of former campaign managers and their ilk can best describe the drama unfolding in these things. Who won what primary by what margin tells you nothing about that event. Ah, but how the weasels plied their trade is where the rubber hits the road. I think that's it. Hunter had skid marks on his back and thank God he described the ride. He didn't waste precious time taking down the final speedometer numbers. And by the way, "unbiased" is an academic word, it has no place in the real world. No one is unbiased. No one.

How important are elements of fiction and fantasy to journalism? And why is this?

One man's fantasy is another's stark reality. This is usually an idea wrongly attributed to the Maquis de Sade, but I'm fairly sure it is an entirely American invention. Thomas Edison, probably the greatest citizen of the state in which I currently reside, was a huge proponent of abusing fantasy to better evolve science. Edison was pure Gonzo. A series of painful electrocutions will do that for you. But Edison was no journalist. He hated newspapers. This was his motivation in creating a moving picture camera, to obliterate the fantasies of the written word. But he didn't count on Hunter or Gonzo Journalism, which absolutely set the idea that fiction has no place in respectable journalism on its head.

Do you believe there is a danger in journalists inflicting their own views on the public? Does this involve too much trust in the journalist?

Every journalist is inflicting something on someone. I'm doing it right now and I'm not even aware of it. It's this terrible tick we have, like a turrets seizure. Watch the first thirty seconds of 60 Minutes and you'll see a symphony of explosive inflictions. This is important; because it balances the nonsense of indoctrination into other people's lives that journalists must endure. Journalism in its most root form is nothing more than describing as best you can the achievements and derailments of other people's lives. By its very construct it is pathologically delusional. The worst kind of people are journalists, and worse still, many of the truly damaged are their readers. Trust is a two-way street; but the addiction to it cannot be discounted. Let's face it; people want to do things and others will want to know about it. The more well-known the person and the more power the person has gathered, the more their actions will be displayed and you can bet your last dollar there will be someone there to display it, for a pay check, of course. And those who pay out those amounts will charge you for the displays. Trust has less to do with it than addiction, really. We're addicted to info in this country. Addiction is our greatest resource as citizens. It's good, though. Better to know now than to be sandbagged later.

Do you believe that the views of HST can be taken seriously when taking in account the amount of drugs he consumed?

Dead serious. Recently at a book signing in Raleigh, NC, someone asked me why I

use so many expletives and vulgarities in my coverage of politics, and I simply replied that I dare anyone to attempt it without using the word “fuck” and feel satisfied that it was a job well done. Drugs? I think Hunter’s use of drugs can no more be a deterrent to his ability to coin “accurate” portrayals of events than say H.L. Mencken’s furious abuses of whiskey or the amount of mayonnaise an AP reporter slathers on his free press conference buffet. It’s all relative, really. And I hope you realize I am being serious here. Drugs, sometimes, not always, or stimulants or alcohol or interspersing the word “fuck” into a story is not only warranted, but paramount.

Having met Hunter on several occasions, and having spoken to him more or less soberly, I would conclude that, for the most part, his consumption of drugs and alcohol and its effects on his writing were far less than advertised. Did it eventually, gradually deteriorate a fine and sharp mind over time? To some degree, yes, although I loved the later stuff, many do not. However, most of the literary and journalistic tribe, the George Plimptons and the Tom Wolfes and the Ed Bradleys and the David Broders and Tim Russerts, and the P.J O'Rourkes of the world, have held Thompson's work in the highest regard. How it got that way was Hunter's problem, not the readers.

Also, it must absolutely be said that Hunter's political and social sensibilities were at the heart of his generation. He was, in the way that Mark Twain was, a man for his times. These were times of high drug consumption, living large, playing on the affluence of the latter part of the American Century - excess for the mere sake of excess in a time when excess was being lauded as a form of success, and mostly in a time when more and more is never enough. This is the main *Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas* premise and even beyond for Hunter. He was able to play-up, exploit, meander through the culture as well as any writer or artist has been able to achieve during his times.

I take sincerity seriously. Hunter was absolutely sincere, even at his most cynical and abrasive and comedic.

Are drugs an inherent part of gonzo journalism, or were they just one of HSTs vices?

Oooh, inherent? You would have had to ask Hunter that, and I’m not being evasive for effect. I think, and I am not alone, that pure, unsullied and unhampered Gonzo lived and died with Hunter. It is not something someone can “practice” anymore than I can utilize the first Pope’s brain to conquer South America, although this is a fantasy worth probing. Not sure I even understand the question; in the sense that someone’s substance intake and their creative output are an entirely personal experience. I suppose “Blonde on Blonde” may have been a less deviant work had Dylan not blown six hundred pounds of pot or “Starry, Starry Night” may have appeared a tad different had Van Gogh gone a less absinthe-heavy direction. And think about all the work we’d miss had Hemmingway not killed so many animals, right?

To best answer your question, though, I’d say Gonzo has little to do with drugs. It is a severe study of extremes and excess. This could apply to religion, sports, gambling – which Hunter does with voraciously and with relish – politics, certainly writing, etc. Gonzo is exposing the limits of a subject, an event, a personality. The best example of how Gonzo hits at the very heart of an event is Hunter's first actual Gonzo piece, "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent & Depraved". It's almost as if it is a time capsule for the event *and* Hunter and Gonzo Journalism all at once. It is a shooting star kind of thing. After that it could be argued the experiment was no longer needed. It was nailed on

the head the very first time. Here is Gonzo at its purest, most dangerous form; and for my money, the finest American reporting and writing known to the craft. Not even stuffy, arrogant, pretentious professors can argue this. With "Kentucky Derby" Hunter Thompson painted his masterpiece. It is pure journalism, pure 20th century, furious reporting. The rest is gravy. Drugs, whatever.

Why have you chosen to be a gonzo journalist?

I'm glad I have the tag, but know little to nothing about Gonzo as I've described or how Hunter S. Thompson practiced it. I suppose it is something of a performance art as much as a writing style. I do what I do, and it is nothing resembling journalism in the practical sense. For me it is more using journalistic circles to make a crude form of art. It's not even particularly satire or irony. Not sure that the hell I'm doing. Maybe if I were more famous or acted crazier someone would tag it. But for now, I guess I'm happy living in the enormous shadow of Hunter. He is godfather to us all.

Is gonzo journalism too rooted in the 1970's audience to be affective today? How could gonzo adapt to today audience?

Well, now that's like saying jazz is too rooted in the '30s or rock and roll in the 50's. If Gonzo is a style or an art form, then it will evolve. If not, it dies with Hunter or it is put in a time capsule, like say, Psychedelic '60s stuff or '90s Grunge Music. I love how documentary filmmaker Wayne Ewing describes his footage of Hunter as being the next step in the experiment of Gonzo Journalism. He is in the moment, capturing Hunter, telling the story, but also being in the story, imposing his will on it, as a camera might in any situation; check, say reality television for an example. The people know the damn camera is there; never mind the intrusive lighting or the parade of techs following then around all over the place. And then they have their agents yapping on the phone in the background. The whole thing becomes less reality and more this other morphed thing. So maybe it has a new home on screen. Hey, there's gonzo porn. That's a new thing. It's capturing something with your point of view, a unique perspective that only the person at the helm of the storytelling can control.

I still think it is primarily a Hunter machine, but I suppose it has evolved with the years, and even throughout the years beyond the '70s with Hunter himself. I think *Curse of Lono* is as Gonzo as the original Kentucky Derby piece, which as I say is one of the finest examples of the American spirit set ablaze by a true creative genius. I read that thing at least twice a year to refuel my juices. Anyone who has been straddled with an assignment and hounded by deadlines can relate to that craziness. But even though Hunter hit the "high white note" with that one, it's not like he decided to pack it in.

What do you believe will be the future for gonzo journalism? In what mode will this be (ie. Internet, newspapers, books)

I think the Internet is made for the Gonzo-style thing. They should have called the Internet, The Gonzo. That's what they should call fucking Google, Gonzo. Honestly. If it has any hope of surviving the 21st century, then yeah, the Internet.

Do you find it harder to get your work published as a gonzo journalist rather than a traditional one?

No. I think the tag actually gets my stuff read where it otherwise wouldn't. As I say, I'm lucky to be lumped in there with Hunter. Shit, I'm lucky to be lumped in there with any published cretin or hero or whatever. It's part of a brethren or a weird council. I am sure if Hunter were here right now and you asked him if he were happy to be put in the same breath as Samuel Clemens, he would not hesitate to pound his fist in joy. Fucking-A.

The Gonzo thing may not always be gangbusters, and reeks of the derivative, but it's better to be part of the roll call than not. But listen, I cannot stress this enough. I don't think, say, as an artist, anyone has been able to do what Lenny Bruce did first or best. It would be mad to compare anyone to him artistically, and not only because he came first, because he didn't, really. There were other people who used the shock thing, vulgarities and attacked religion and authority long before him. But I think Hunter and Lenny have a lot in common, even though from one of his letters in a recent compilation, he clearly states having been underwhelmed by Lenny's work. They were both just a single purveyor of a style as it pertains to their craft. I'm not even sure I understand what I mean, but eventually you throw the mold out, right? You can't have someone else *like* Hunter *doing* Hunter. People do it all the time and fail miserably. I have done it and failed. I do my thing. If people look at it and say, "It's just someone doing Hunter badly." That's fair. It's not remotely true anymore, though. Hunter and I talked about that very subject. And Hunter was the first to say it is not an intellectual pursuit, this Gonzo business. Also, who has the right to say what it is or what it isn't? It's not even his word. Gonzo. It was hoisted on him! So, when Lenny Bruce would say, "I'm not a comedian," I'm Lenny Bruce." I can hear Hunter saying, "I'm no journalist or Gonzo Journalist or whatever tag you hang on me, bub. I'm Doctor Hunter Stockton Thompson." Couldn't you hear that? I sure can.

I guess if you're willing to trade words for bucks, make deadlines, and choose interesting people and times, you are going to make a buck. Things are far different now than when Hunter started or even when I started. With cable news and a million celebrity channels and magazines up the wazoo, the Internet, et al, this is the information age. Get on the highway with a notepad and an idea, any idea, and let it flow. Personally, I have no use for journalism anymore, if I ever did. Like I say, what I practice is some form of mutated journalism, but who is practicing pure journalism? No one. That is the answer to that.

So it is patently naive to think you can achieve the unachievable. I think it is ultimately important to have all modes of reporting available to the reading public, as long as they are willing to dig and research and consider the source. That is where nothing has changed in journalism. For every William Randolph Hearst, there is an Edward R. Murrow, and so on. For every Geraldo Rivera, there is an H.L. Mencken. There is utter crap and brilliance, and sometimes if you look closely, you might get the story out of it.