"I was a ball of nerves and sleepless paranoia (figuring that I might be next)..."

Terry Gilliam's film of Fear & Loathing in Las Vegas and the publication of the early novel Rum Diary late last year, indicate a retrospective interest in Hunter S. Thompson. The reviews of the film (Screen, Variety) were consistently bad—in the sense that they failed to understand anything of the work. Thompson's style is taken for drug addled ranting, yet it provides scholarly and precise insights into the period, blended with a real passion, humanity and commitment, which are absent from conventional accounts.

Much of Thompson's work—certainly that of the early '60s—is akin to the investigative journalism of the 'Muckrakers' of some fifty years ago. The Proud Highway, another recent collection of letters to and from Thompson, makes a comparison to Lincoln Steffens. Little known now, Steffens together with Ida Tarbell and Upton Sinclair (who like Thompson ran for office) wrote fearless, impartial and enormously popular accounts of American cities rancid with corruption.[1]

Much of Thompson's early work for the National Observer, particularly Democracy Dies in Peru But Few Seem to Mourn its Passing, show him as a complete freelance, who with no resources whatsoever, writing better analysis than the mainstream press: largely because of his sheer involvement with the story. Discussion of Thompson tends to focus on his lifestyle, which is largely born out of establishing a way to operate without money. The person revealed in the Proud Highway is one of astonishing self-reliance, determination and self-sufficiency. Be that as it may, Fear and Loathing came about largely by accident and desperation when he thought his career as a writer was over.

The film is a very faithful adaptation of the book and of course the book is supposedly based on real events.[2] It seems little-known or forgotten now, that Thompson wrote an introduction to the early copies of Fear and Loathing which set out its real context: the murder of Ruben Salazar in the Silver Dollar Cafe by the Los Angeles County Sheriffs Department on August 29 1970.

While he worked on the Salazar story (which appeared in Rolling Stone 81 on April 29 1971), around about dawn in an effort to relax, Thompson would also work on the jumble of notes and taped gibberish of what would become Fear & Loathing.[3] So the two were written in tandem. Chronologically the events of the Salazar killing precede the little holiday in Las Vagas, which happened in early April '71.

It was probably his most dangerous story—caught between the enraged Chicanos who wanted to kill him on principle, because he was white, and the police who were running amok, Thompson pried radical lawyer, Oscar Acosta (his main contact on the story and an old friend) away from the situation so that they could talk openly.

> "Flashing across the desert at 110 in a big red convertible with the top down, there is not much danger of being bugged or overheard...By the time I got back to the Rolling Stone HQ. in San Francisco, the Salazar story was winding out at around 19,000 words, and the strange Vegas 'fantasy' was running on its own spaced energy and pushing 5000 words—with no end in sight and no real reason to continue working on it, except the pure pleasure of unwinding on paper."

Their dialogue on Salazar is not directly recorded in the novel—the tone of it is. The two stories intermingle on various levels. Suffice to say that both of them had stepped from a situation where the world could have ended at any moment in the same fate that met Salazar. It did for Acosta a few short years later. That factor should be added to any reading of the stress of events in Las Vegas. The two stories are collected in the Modern Library version of Fear and Loathing and Other American Stories; which cruelly cuts out Acosta from its cover photograph of the pair looking wide awake and abnormally normal in a casino at three o'clock in the morning.

In his short life Ruben Salazar became a nationally known professional journalist with ten years experience. He had won prizes for work in Vietnam and was something of a veteran war correspondent. Of Mexican American heritage himself, he was employed by the Los Angeles Times to cover 'local issues':

> "Within months, he had narrowed his work for the Times down to a once-a-week column for the newspaper, and signed on as news director for KMEX-TV—the 'Mexican American station', which he quickly transformed into an energetic, aggressively political voice for the whole Chicano community. His coverage of police activities made the East Los Angeles Sheriffs Department so unhappy that they soon found themselves in a sort of running private argument with this man Salazar, this spic who refused to be reasonable. When Salazar got on to a routine story like some worthless kid named Ramirez getting beaten to death in a jail-fight, he was likely to come up with almost anything—including a series of hard-hitting news commentaries strongly suggesting that the victim had been beaten to death by the jailers. In the summer of 1970 Ruben Salazar was warned three times, by the cops, to 'tone down his coverage'. And each time he told them to fuck off."[4]

Salazar was killed in the aftermath of a huge riot caused by a police attack on a peaceful anti-Vietnam rally in Laguna Park in east Los Angeles. Three people were killed and sixty injured. Thompson's story works his way through the evasions of the Sheriff's nervous mouthpiece as the police version of events collapses, even without an attack by Chicano partisans. At this point the question he tries to answer is are the police willing to kill anyone who seems to be annoying them?

Naturally the local press makes itself available to the status quo, to spread red menace stories of outside agitators. Thompson's assessment of the quality of the main paper the Los Angeles Herald-Examiner still stands for most papers today and reminded me of Glasgow's own Herald:[5]

> "As one of the few remaining Hearst organs, it serves a perverted purpose in its role as a monument to everything cheap, corrupt and vicious in the realm of journalistic possibility. It is hard to understand, in fact, how the shriveled Hearst management can still find enough gimps, bigots and deranged Papists to staff a rotten paper like the Herald."

William Clark

Above Left: *Ralph Steadman's illustration from* Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas

As the case unfolds a photograph of the Sheriff's deputy pointing a shotgun at the front door of the Silver Dollar Cafe emerges as do eye-witness accounts by Salazar's fellow newscaster, who was covering the riot with him and had joined him in the Cafe. When the accounts of what happened are published in la Raza—a militant Chicano newspaper—the police respond with more lunatic versions of events.

After the coroner's inquest the police slip the hook. Tom Wilson, who finally admitted to firing the death weapon evades any charges, moderate Chicano spokesmen ask for an investigation, the militants call for an uprising and the cops do nothing. Thompson seems convinced that the police were too inept to have actually conspired to kill Salazar, but:

> "The malignant reality of Ruben Salazar's death is that he was murdered by angry cops for no reason at all—and that the LA Sherif's Department was and still is prepared to defend that murder on grounds that it was entirely justified. Salazar was killed, they say, because he happened to be in a bar where police thought there was also a 'man with a gun'. They gave him a chance, they say, by means of a bullhorn warning...and when he didn't come out with his hands up, they had no choice but to fire a tear gas bazooka into the bar...and his head got in the way? Tough luck. But what was he doing in that place, anyway? Lounging around a noisy Chicano bar in the middle of a communist riot?"

It is hard now to comprehend the militancy of the times. The working title of Fear and Loathing was The Death of the American Dream. Originally Thompson set out to write something similar to Tom Wolfe's book on the Merry Prankster's Acid tests, but he decided to study politics close at hand. In Chicago in '68 Thompson was present at the five days of street fighting and eventual civil war with the National Guard, outside the Conrad Hilton Hotel where the Democratic Party Convention delegates and nominee, Hubert Humphrey, were staying:

> "For me, that week in Chicago was far worse than the worst acid trip I'd heard rumors about...It permanently altered my brain chemistry, and my first new idea—when I finally calmed down—was an absolute conviction there was no possibility for any personal truce...in a nation that could hatch and be proud of a malignant monster like Chicago. Suddenly it seemed imperative to get a grip on those who had somehow slipped into power and caused the thing to happen."

The massive onslaught on the left in America and the subsequent rise of Nixon saw Thompson retreat to Aspen to narrowly lose in his 'Freak Power' campaign to run for Sheriff—it was originally started as a joke and it was here he met Acosta. Thompson later tried to initiate a platform which would mobilise 'the rock vote' for the Democrats in their desperate attempts to be rid of Nixon. With his journey alongside the Democratic Party Election campaign in '72 (which in those days was like a Rolling Stones Tour) he became the political Junkie he remains.

It was Acosta who tracked him down and suggested involvement in the Salazar story. Acosta was then defending six young Chicanos who had been arrested for trying to burn down the Biltmore Hotel, while the then Governor, Ronald Reagan was delivering a speech. He was also busy trying to subpoena all 109 Superior Court Judges in Los Angeles County and cross-examine them at length, under oath, on the subject of racism.

The Salazar story ends with Thompson outlining the brazen cover-up of the political upheavals of the area—the denial of the political legitimacy of the Chicano struggle through racism. The police attempts to present a public relations front are ripped to shreds as Thompson phones pretending to be coming to town to cover events and is told all manner of insanity contrary to what he has just witnessed.

Thompson's Salazar story and the more 'conventional' work of the radical press, particularly magazines like Ramparts, began to lift up the lid of the FBI Counter Intelligence Program (COINTELPRO), a massive and widespread campaign to subvert left-wing organisations involving agent provocateurs, harassment, phone taps, surveillance, informants, framing of suspects and assassinations. COINTELPRO had followed on from the anti-Communist crusades of the '50s. An engaging history of the American Counter Culture and the influence of LSD is wrapped up very nicely in Martin A Lee and Bruce Shalain's recent Acid Dreams, The Complete Social History of LSD.[6] The book seems an American import published a few years ago and now available in the UK. It maps out the early use of the drug by the East coast CIA-connected elite, mentioning some extraordinary characters such as Captain Alfred M. Hubbard an early Acid evangelist (he supplied several heads of state, ambassadors and Aldous Huxley). We also find Ken Kesey and Allen Ginsberg as early acid guinea pigs in medical experiments prior to the systematic demonisation of the drug for political purposes. At times the book spirals off into the convoluted intrigue of the times:

> "The CIA was in cahoots with organised crime; Agency personnel based in Southeast Asia were involved in the heroin trade; for eight years the drug was smuggled inside returning corpses of American servicemen who had died in Vietnam; and corrupt police pushed junk in New York, Detroit, and other major urban ghettos."

That is pretty straight-forward compared to the story of the Castle Bank, set up by the CIA as a money wash to facilitate the hidden transfer of huge sums to finance subversion, paramilitary operations, coup d' etats, Mob hit teams and so forth. Richard Nixon was among the three hundred prominent Americans who used Castle to deposit their cash (which included Tony Curtis, Hugh Hefner, Bob Guccione, Chiang Kai-shek's daughter and Howard Huges). It also laundered money for the Brotherhood of Eternal Love an organisation who distributed millions of doses of LSD until they were penetrated by CIA agent Ron Stark, a truly wierd individual whose connections included the Sicilian mafia, Shiite warlords, the PLO, the Red Brigades and on and on through a hundred twists and turns.

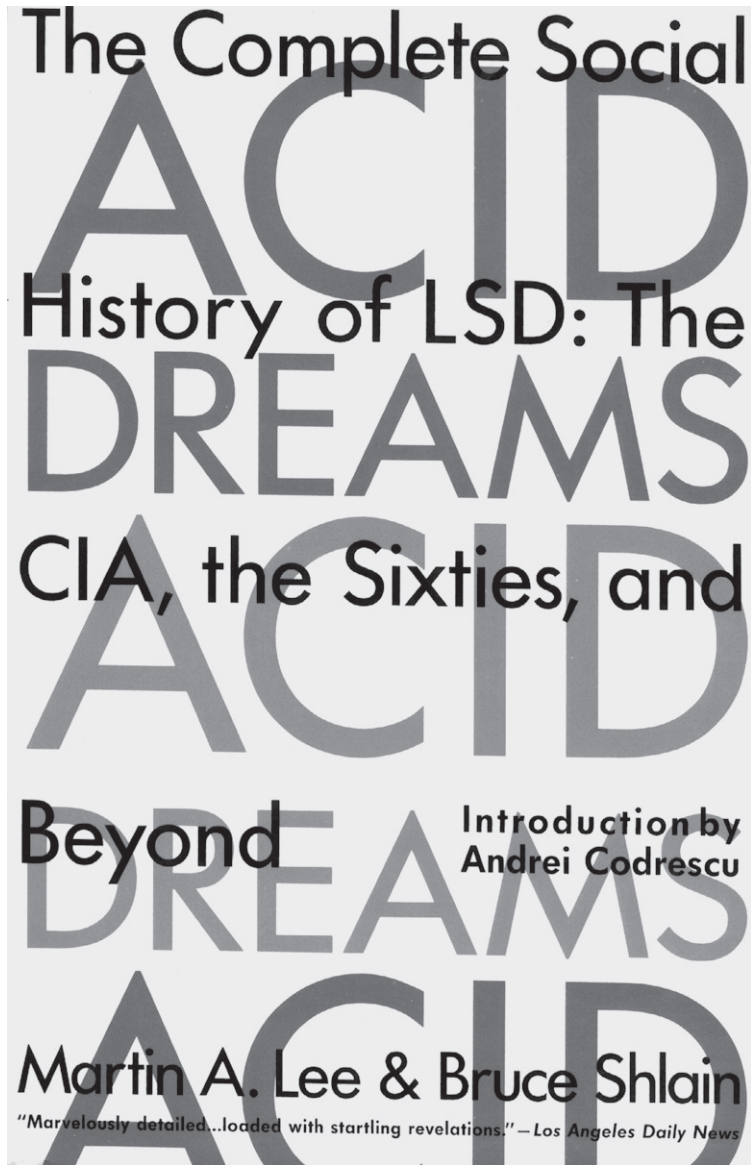
Another progressive aspect of Thompson's Journalistic style often ignored, is his use of technology, particularly the tape recorder (which was still something of a novelty). This is from the opening of Fear and Loathing:

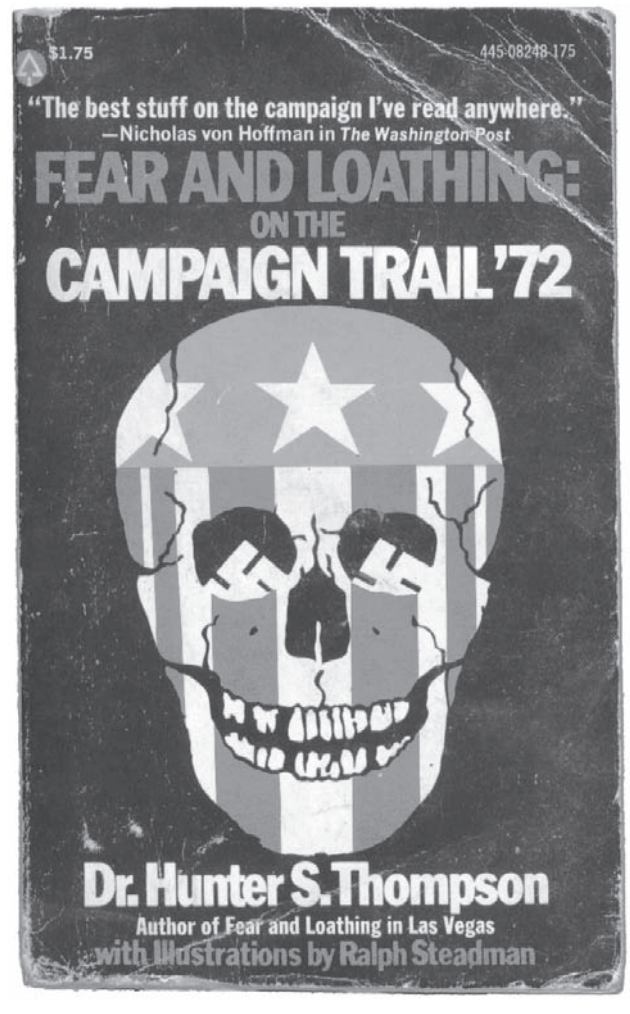
> "This blows my weekend, because naturally I'll have to go with you—and we'll have to arm ourselves."
> "Why not?" I said. "If a thing like this is worth doing at all, its worth doing right. We'll need some decent equipment and plenty of cash on the line – if only for drugs and a super-sensitive tape recorder, for the sake of a permanent record."

Thompson's other abiding interest is in the technology to transfer his transcriptions, usually at the last minute. He claims to be the chief exponent of the MOJO wire—a telefax machine. In his home he set up a massive media monitoring station with the advent of satellite technology. Access is as much one of his lusts as ice in large quantities with Wild Turkey. Electric typewriters are as much of a fetish as his gun lust. In the film there is an image of the tape recorder microphone tapped to his head when he is tripping as if it had been grafted on.

The metaphorical core of Fear and Loathing is a 'tape transcription' of their search for "the American dream" in a "White Whale"[7] with Thompson and Acosta assuming their aliases of Dr. Gonzo and his Attorney. In the transcription they ask a waitress in a diner about a "place called the American Dream." Confused, people from behind the counter all try to help with directions to a place down the road which was:

> "The old Psychiatrist's Club on Paradise...It was a discotheque place...but the only people who hang out there are a bunch of pushers, peddlers, uppers and





> downer, and all that stuff...it's a mental joint where all the dopers hang out."

The conversation spirals inward like Kafka standing waiting at the final door of the castle. The transcription ends because of garbled tape:

> "There is a certain consistency in the garbled sounds however, indicating that almost two hours later Dr. Duke and his attorney finally located what was left of the "Old Psychiatrist's Club" —a huge slab of cracked, scorched concrete in a vacant lot full of tall weeds. The owner of a gas station across the road said the place had "burned down about three years ago."

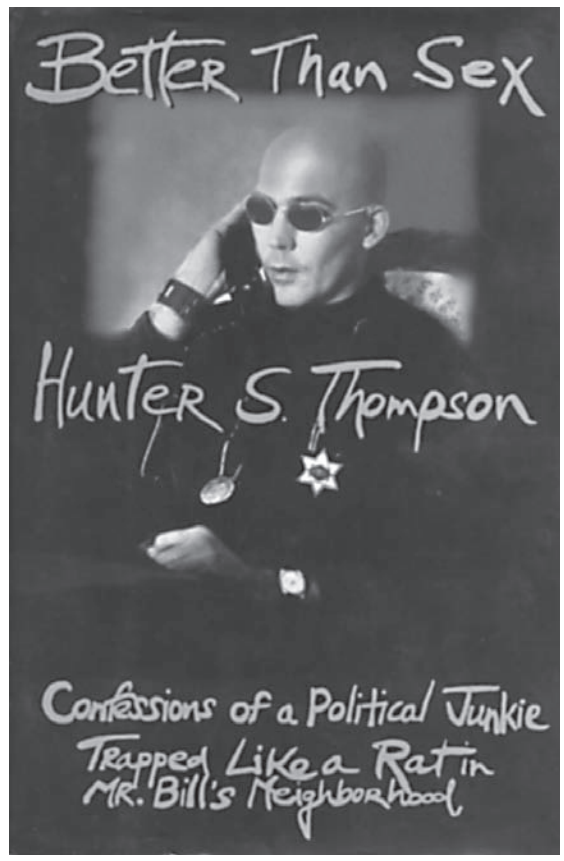
At first reading it appears that the characters behind the counter are advising that the pair head 'that little way further out west', quoting the constitution's advice of what to do if you are tired of an oppressive government. This is a poetic subtext—or at least an allusion to Thompson's notion of freedom. But it is more directly related to his earlier description of his life at the height of the '60s counter-culture:

> "My central memory of that time seems to hang on one or five or maybe forty nights— or very early mornings—when I left the Filmore half-crazy and, instead of going home, aimed the big 650 Lightning across the bay bridge at a hundred miles an hour wearing L.L. Bean shorts and a Butte sheepherder's jacket...booming through the Treasure Island tunnel at the lights of Oakland and Berkley and Richmond, not quite sure which turn-off to take when I got to the other end (always stalling at the toll-gate, too twisted to find neutral while I fumbled for change)... but being absolutely certain that no matter which way I would come to a place where people were just as high and wild as I was: No doubt about that..."

The diner transcription—the search for the freedom of the American Dream—is absent from the film. Instead it picked out the preceding passages in the book which talk of the spirit of the times through the music and drugs, principally LSD. It is here in the film that Thompson himself makes an appearance as himself being remembered. Gilliam's film touches on the freedom of the motorbike scene through the narrative, ignoring it pictorially. It would have been very difficult to film.

> "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. "

The film leaves us (the camera pulls out from Johnny Depp's head) with Thompson's monologue towards the close of the book, which castigated Timothy Leary.



Who, according to Acid Dreams, turned State's Evidence while on trail, providing information on all manner of people in the underground:

> "We are all wired into a survival trip now. No more of the speed that fueled the sixties. Uppers are going out of style. This was the fatal flaw in Tim Leary's trip. He crashed around America selling "consciousness expansion" without ever giving a thought to the grim meat-hook realities that were lying in wait for all the people who took him too seriously. After West Point and the priesthood, LSD must have seemed entirely logical to him...but there is not much satisfaction in knowing that he blew it very badly for himself, because he took too many others down with him. Not that they didn't deserve it: No doubt They all Got What Was Coming To Them. All those pathetically eager acid freaks who thought they could buy Peace and Understanding for three bucks a hit. But their loss and failure is ours too. What Leary took down with him was the central illusion of a whole life-style that he helped to create ... a generation of permanent cripples, failed seekers, who never understood the essential old-mystic fallacy of the Acid Culture: the desperate assumption that somebody—or at least some force —is tending that Light at the end of the tunnel."

Thompson is not part of the hippy drop-out culture. Drugs are not extolled as a virtue. When the slaughter of Vietnam and the war against dissent at home was passed off as order—rationality, he like many others tried to resist it by any means necessary. A big—at times dangerous—part of that was telling the truth.

notes

1 According to The Muckrakers by Arthur and Lila Weinberg (Capricorn 1964) the term was used pejoratively by President Roosevelt: "He charged that the writers who were engaged in the exposure of corruption were "muckrakers," and likened them to the man with the muckrake in Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress who could "look no way but downward, with a muckrake in his hands; who was offered a celestial crown for his muckrake, but who would neither look up nor regard the crown he was offered, but continued to rake to himself the filth of the floor." The speech, to a club of newsmen was off the record and soon became common gossip.

2 One of the producers, Patrick Cassavetti, has worked on a range of projects that have met with censorship and/or attack for little other reason than their artistic merits, such as Gilliam's Brazil and Alan Clarke's Made in Britain. He has also worked with David Leland, Neil Jordan, Davis Hare, Stephen Friers, Ken Loach (in Looks and Smiles) and Warren Beatty (in Reds).

3 This also outlined his concept of 'Gonzo journalism' stating somewhat modestly that the book was "a victim of its own conceptual schizophrenia, caught and finally crippled in that vain, academic limbo between 'journalism' and 'fiction'. And then hoist on its own petard of multiple felonies and enough flat-out crime to put anybody who'd admit to this kind of stinking behavior in the Nevada State Prison until 1984". The introduction – which was never used as such by the publishers – was eventually published in "The Great Shark Hunt", first published in the UK in 1980 by Picador. this also contains the Salazar story "Strange Rumblings in Azltan."
Thompson stated to P. J O' Rourke: "Right after Hemingway wrote The Sun Also Rises, he wrote a very small book, not much noticed. And I remember reading that he said, "I wrote that just to cool out after The Sun Also Rises." I was working on Salazar, an ugly murder story. You know how you get. You get that, "Fuck, damn, where shall we go now? Whose throat can I eat?" And when I got stuck out in that Holiday Inn near the Santa Anita racetrack, outside Pasadena, I was there to work on this murder story. That was work, boy, that was blood. And, boy, that role got very, very tough. That's why I went to Las Vegas. And when I came back from Las Vegas, I was still writing that story." Rolling Stone 748

4 The owners of the station made sure it reverted back into a more 'friendly' style after Salazar's murder.

5 Obviously without the Papists.

6 Thompson is featured intermittently in Acid Dreams as are descriptions of what he was taking: "Owsley's product first hit the streets in february 1965...He...was on hand to freak freely at some wild parties hosted by Kesey...Owsley was obsessed with making his product as pure as possible—even purer than Sandoz, which described LSD in its scientific reports as a yellowish crystalline substance. As he mastered his illicit craft, Owsley found a way to refine the crystal so that it appeared blue-white under fluorescent lamp; moreover, if the crystals were shaken, they emitted flashes of light, which meant that LSD in its pure form was piezoluminescent – a property shared by a very small number of compounds." (p 146) It is interesting to compare Acid Dreams to "Days in the Life" by Jonathon Green, where the British Underground is defined as the hobbies of a few public school boys.

7 In addition to the references to Melville's Moby Dick, Gilliam seemed to smuggle in a reference to Traven's 'The Death Ship'. Thompson has long struggled to write a book akin to Fitzgerald's 'The Great Gatsby'.