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## Ralph Steadman's Illustrations as Part of Gonzo Journalism's Core DNA

**Drawings, or 'illustrations', as they are miserably called, can be the means of energizing the life of a text. Where is *Winnie the Pooh* without its illustrations? Where is *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* without its Gonzo drawings? (Steadman 77)**

It is wildly believed that the role of the illustration is to explain, supplement, interpret the text, add information, evoke emotional states or intensify the effect of the literary work. The illustration should, in a creative way, complement the writer's words, prolong their impact and harmonize with the style and the spirit of the text (Głombiowski 58). Interestingly, there seemed to be no consensus among writers in this matter as it would appear that not all the writers agree on the positive role of the illustrations in literary texts. Russian writers Nikolai Gogol and Yury Tynyanov negated the validity of the illustrations in a book, claiming that they perturb the homogenous and autonomous structure of a literary text (Kaczorowski 18). Henry James rejected with indignation the possibility of issuing an illustrated edition of his collected works. The author of *The Bostonians* was not able to accept the idea of a competition between the image that was created by the writer with the image created by an illustrator. The thought of combining his work with visual arts was also unacceptable to a French writer, Gustave Flaubert. The fact remains, however, that there were also writers, who, for a myriad of reasons, strived toward supplementing their texts with illustrations. Thus to take one example, Charles Dickens collaborated with an English artist Hablot Knight Browne (known as Phiz), who, in a perfect way, adapted to the writer's expression. Or to take another example, William Makepeace Thackeray created drawings for his own works and Victor Hugo readily accepted the idea of placing illustrations in his novels (Wiercińska 36). The twentieth century novels

are not bereft of illustrations. Dos Passos's trilogy *U.S.A.* has vivid sketches by Reginald Marsh, Noel Sikles added splendid drawings to Hemingway's *Old Man and the Sea* and a more contemporary writer, Don DeLillo, included pictures in *The Angel Esmeralda*.

A compatible relationship between the image and the text can be perfectly illustrated by the dynamic duo of the father of gonzo journalism, Hunter S. Thompson and a British illustrator, Ralph Steadman. Hunter Thompson and Ralph Steadman worked together since 1971, their most important projects were "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" (1971), *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1971), a novel that originally appeared as a two-part series in *Rolling Stone* magazine, *Fear and Loathing on the Campaign Trail '72* (1972), a collection of articles covering the 1972 presidential campaign and *The Curse of Lono* (1983), a book describing the author's adventures in Hawaii in 1980.

The present article aims to argue that the interplay between Thompson's texts and Steadman's illustrations adds tangibility and meaningfulness to the stories and enhances their esthetical appeal. Steadman's illustrations also intensified the specific grotesqueness of Thompson's literary style.

Hunter S. Thompson gained his first national fame as a crank journalist who went on the road with an outlaw motorcycle gang of Hell's Angels.<sup>1</sup> After the publication of *Hell's Angels* (1966) Thompson became a leading authority on the motorcycle gang, his popularity began to grow, the book also allowed for his credibility in the world of mainstream journalism. He began to write articles for different newspapers and magazines. However, the publication of "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" (1970), gave Thomson's style a name and launched his gonzo journalism career. Three years after his publication of *Hell's Angels* Hunter Thompson was assigned to write a story about Kentucky Derby in his hometown Louisville. It was supposed to be an article for *Scanlan's* magazine in which Thompson wanted to show senseless rituals of the South's ruling class and expose how distasteful it really was. He felt it would be better if the story was accompanied with illustrations, which could perfectly capture the ugliness of the event. Pat Oliphant of the *Denver Post* had been chosen, but because he was unavailable *Scanlan's* suggested Ralph Steadman, a Welshman, known as Britain's most original magazine illustrator. Steadman took the assignment but forgot to take his toolkit. He was fortunate, though, as the editor's wife was a Rev-

1 The fragments on gonzo journalism, "The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* are based on my Ph.D. dissertation defended in 2012 at SWPS/University of Social Sciences and Humanities in Warsaw.

lon representative and gave him samples of pencils, lipstick and blush. “[B] izzarely, those Revlon samples were the birth of Gonzo art” (Steadman 9). Thompson wanted Steadman to capture the real Kentucky face, the immoral, corrupt faces of the local establishment. He had no problem finding many horrible people to draw:

Thousands of raving, stumbling drunks, getting angrier and angrier as they lose more and more money. By midafternoon they’ll be guzzling mint juleps with both hands and vomiting on each other between races. The whole place will be jammed with bodies, shoulder to shoulder. It’s hard to move around. The aisles will be slick with vomit; people falling down and grabbing at your legs to keep from being stomped. Drunks pissing on themselves in the betting lines. Dropping handfuls of money and fighting to stoop over and pick it up.” (Thompson 1970)

The following quotation from “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” demonstrates that Thompson had certain expectations about Steadman’s drawings. He wanted the illustrator to draw the pictures that emerged in his imagination and would complement his descriptions:

He had done a few good sketches, but so far we hadn’t seen that special kind of face that I felt we would need for a lead drawing. It was a face I’d seen a thousand times at every Derby I’d ever been to. I saw it, in my head, as the mask of the whiskey gentry—a pretentious mix of booze, failed dreams and a terminal identity crisis; the inevitable result of too much inbreeding in a closed and ignorant culture. (Thompson 1970)

Unquestionably, Steadman’s puffy, disease-ridden caricatures symbolized the atavistic culture that Thompson wished to present. The faces that Thompson saw in his head symbolized corruption, madness and greed. All those negative aspects were explicitly extracted in Steadman’s drawings, which helped define gonzo art and gonzo journalism. The Kentucky assignment also started a friendship between Thompson and Steadman. Neither of them witnessed the race as they spent all their time drinking. When Thompson returned to New York he could not remember most of what had happened. The journalist only recollected wild drinking bouts and had some notes in his notebook. Thompson broke down, unable to provide traditional narration. He produced the article with no special effort or care believing that he would never get a decent magazine assignment again. To Thompson’s surprise, *Scanlan’s* published the piece as the author had transmitted it. The article ran in the June issue in 1970 and had a caption: “Written under duress by Hunter S. Thompson” and “Sketched with eyebrow pencil and lipstick by Ralph Steadman” (McKeen 148). “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved”

showed moral decline of the South and revealed how uptight, stiff and hermetic it was. The story was “the first piece ever written about the Derby that was brave enough to admit that the ritual had little to do with ladies in sun hats fanning themselves with programs and men in seersucker suits sipping mint juleps” (McKeen 243). Thompson’s friend and the editor of the *Boston Globe* Sunday magazine said it was so outrageous that it needed its own name and called it “pure gonzo” (McKeen 229-235), then Hunter Thompson found his own bold and brazen style of writing called gonzo journalism. It is an off-shoot and extreme version of the New Journalism.

Thompson differentiates between gonzo and New Journalism, à la Wolfe, in that he (Thompson) never sets out to reconstruct a story. Wolfe is a better reporter, a re-creator of facts. Thompson says “I like to get right in the middle of whatever I’m writing about, as personally involved as possible.” Within the method of pure gonzo is spontaneity ... no rewriting allowed ... the first draft screeds must stand. (McKeen 206)

Although Thompson’s own definitions changed over the years, he always claimed that a good gonzo journalist “needs the talent of master journalist, the eye of an artist/photographer and the heavy balls of an actor” (Carroll 149) and that gonzo is a “style of reporting based on William Faulkner’s idea that the best fiction is far more true than any kind of journalism” (Carroll 146). Many critics have attempted to define gonzo. Thompson’s biographer McKeen favors a definition given by Louisville reporter John Filiatreau:

[Gonzo] can only be defined as what Hunter Thompson does ... It generally consists of the fusion of reality and stark fantasy in a way that amuses the author and outrages his audience. It is Point of View Run Wild. [...] Gonzo requires virtually no rewriting, with the reporter and the quest for information as the focal point. Notes, snatches from other articles, transcribed interviews, verbatim telephone conversations, telegrams – these are elements of a piece of gonzo journalism. (Evans)

Gonzo is a style of reporting where a reporter involves himself in the action to such a degree that he becomes a central figure of his stories and he cannot remove himself from the subject under investigation. It is done because the purpose of gonzo journalism is to produce a brutally honest or highly subjective journalistic piece based on the real experience of a trained reporter writing from the inside. Thompson almost always wrote in the first person, he used his own experiences and emotions to color the story he was following and to exaggerate events to make them more entertaining.

The word gonzo was apparently first used by Thompson’s friend Bill Cardoso but there is some doubt as to where he encountered the term. To Hunter

Thompson the word meant intense, demented involvement (Lukas 184). Despite different and contradictory etymologies gonzo found its way into the second edition of Random House Dictionary (1987) which uses such words as bizarre, crazy and eccentric to define it (Mitgang 17N). Merriam Webster dictionary defines gonzo journalism as idiosyncratically subjective but the origin is listed as unknown (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary 791). Collins English dictionary has a definition in two parts: wild and crazy, and used of journalism, explicitly including the writer's feelings at the time of witnessing the events or undergoing the experiences written about (Collins English Dictionary 49).

Thompson's style of writing is characterized by a drug-fueled stream of consciousness technique, themes of alcohol, violence, sex, sports and politics, use of vulgarity and sarcasm, careful and detailed descriptions of situations, a tendency to move away from the topic and references to public people. Since gonzo journalism was based on the idea that fidelity to fact did not always lead to truth, one of its features was blurring distinctions between fiction and nonfiction, suggesting that a deeper truth could be found in the ambiguous zones between fact and fiction. (Othitis)

Steadman's slashing art, his social and political caricatures, exaggeration and selective grotesquery were a perfect embodiment of Thompson's drug fueled prose. The bitterness of the drawings was perfectly reflected in Thompson's writing. The illustrator's art caught its madness, gave frightening and vicious portraits to the images suggested in Thompson's stories. Steadman's illustrations helped define and broaden the concept of gonzo, which does not apply only to Thompson's non-fiction writing but also to Steadman's artistic style. Steadman's drawings depicted every nuance of meaning the journalist wished to project, they also put Thompson's words into a truly legitimate scenario and augmented the crazy dimension created in his notebook.

"The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved" was Thompson and Steadman's first assignment and it began a long-lasting relationship, a string of journeys and collaborations. Steadman also provided illustrations for Thompson's novel *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, and they became an iconic and integral part of the book: "They were fucking beautiful", Hunter said of the illustrations. "I told Wenner right off that nobody could possibly catch the madness of this story & that I refused to let anyone else illustrate it ... but Jesus! I was overwhelmed when I saw the shit" (McKeen 168). The intense and visceral drawings for the novel were done in England. Steadman never set foot in Nevada. His "sick" drawings expressed what Hunter Thompson

experienced with a man called Oscar Zeta Acosta<sup>2</sup>. They went to Las Vegas together and what happened there became the source of Thompson's most famous book – *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas. A Savage Journey to the Heart of the American Dream*. In the novel Thompson describes a series of minor incidents claiming they tell more about the unfulfilled American society than any detailed study. In his work Thompson disguised himself as Raul Duke, a journalist, while Acosta was changed to Dr. Gonzo, a manic “300-pound Samoan” attorney. In a red convertible car whose trunk was overflowing with a variety of different drugs, Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo start their journey to Las Vegas. Their purpose is to cover the annual motorcycle race, however, the reader learns quickly that the real assignment is the pursuit of the American Dream. The protagonists are certain that it can be found in Las Vegas, a city which incarnates the shallowness of the American society under the presidency of Richard Nixon at the beginning of the Seventies. This decade marked the time of disappointment and disillusionment as opposed to the decade of the Sixties which Thompson often referred to as an era of hope, love, opportunity for change, promise of expanded consciousness and rebellion. The descriptions of Las Vegas show the state of the country, the society whose glossy veneer is supposed to hide the inside full of hysteria, fraud, insolence, bribery, falsehood, rot, insult and violence. Dr. Gonzo and Raoul Duke arrive in Las Vegas in a state of an absolute intoxication. They are paranoid, hallucinating and unable to cope with the registration procedure. They see the receptionist's face swelling and changing into the face of a Moray Eel. They see terrible things happen around them: a huge reptile gnawing on a woman's neck, carpets soaked with blood. They are afraid that the lizards would maul them. Steadman's illustrations which depict the protagonists' narcotic visions and hideous, silly, deformed faces of the casino guests intensify the feeling of revulsion that the reader feels finding out about hypocrisy, ruthlessness, corruption, and greed, which pervaded Las Vegas. The stoned state of Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo symbolizes absurdity of the society. Their insane and violent behavior reflects the horrifying disasters of the Vietnam War and the death of the Sixties. Compared to the actualities of American life, the reality seems more disturbing than the behavior of the two protagonists. Although they vomit on people, terrify hotel cleaning ladies, destroy hotel apartments, drug and abuse a teenage girl, Duke explains that in comparison to the brutal realities of America his “crimes were pale and meaningless” (74). Ralph Steadman's illustrations depicting hideous actions of Dr. Gonzo and Raoul Duke

2 Oscar Zeta Acosta was a Chicano Movement activist attorney and the author of *Autobiography of a Brown Buffalo* (1972) and *The Revolt of the Cockroach People* (1973).

augment the shock effect. One of such pictures shows naked, vomiting Dr. Gonzo leaning over a filthy toilet and a terrified cleaning lady who sees the heinous scene. Despite the protagonists' degeneration and perversion, they are not presented as psychopaths or thugs but as hypersensitive people, "who have lost their faith in the better future of America and are bitter, disenchant-ed and paranoid" (Durczak 117). Steadman's brilliant and iconoclastic illustrations were a reflection of the story that was in Thompson's mind. Without doubt Steadman possessed a great skill to reach inside his friend's mind and unveil what was there.

Another event described by Thompson is a four-day conference on illegal narcotics. The reason why Duke decides to attend the seminar is the situation's twisted humor since the subject of the conference is punishing such people as he himself and his companion. Familiar with the Drug Culture, Duke and his attorney realize that the authorities have no knowledge or understanding of the "business" they are trying to deal with. Thompson does not believe that there is a police officer among them who could recognize a drug user. He comments that "these poor bastards didn't know mescaline from macaroni" (143) and continues that they had no idea where to start the fight against the drug culture. The whole conference turns out to be a shocking collection of grotesque. Thompson compares the police to a gang of drunken pig farmers (Steadman's police officers have big, stupid, toad-like faces) and realizes that he is no longer hideous or atrocious. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* is an outrageous elegy and unpleasant epitaph for the failed promise of the 1960s. It is also a bitter lament and a burlesque of the American Dream which was brutally destroyed and changed into a mere hope for survival. Thompson's descriptions of the surrounding reality accompanied with Ralph Steadman's illustrations produce a shock effect and emphasize paranoia and madness of the 1970s.

In 1972 Hunter Thompson, as a correspondent for the *Rolling Stone* magazine, covered the presidential campaign. In his full of judgment, semi-hallucinogenic reporting he described the cheap hotels, the monotony of the press bus, the calculated lies of the press secretaries and the agony of writing about the dull and meaningless campaign. Thompson presented his view of the world in his unique literary style with vulgarity and the humorous exaggeration of events. McGovern's political adviser, Frank Mankiewicz called his reporting "the most accurate and the least factual account of the 1972 campaign" (McKeen 194). Thompson "affronted the taboos of political writing, and recorded the nuts and bolts of a presidential campaign with all the contempt and incredulity that other reporters must feel but censor out" (McKeen 194).

Jann Wenner, the editor in chief of the *Rolling Stone*, wanted to repeat the collaboration between Steadman and Thompson. The illustrator again provided his vicious portraits, this time of the presidential candidates: “[...] wheelchair-bound George Wallace spewing bile over an American flag; McGovern urging a convention hall full of lizards to “come home, America”; Nixon at the podium farting through an ass that is Vice President Spiro Agnew; and the big boys of the press corps all vomiting into their cocktails” (McKeen 194). Steadman adopted the pre-war antics of the satire boom which was the fashionable humor at the time.<sup>3</sup> His pictures visualized the horrors of corporate America, revealed the political greed and other grotesqueries that deform and degrade the human forms within his pictures. With his method of isolating and focusing on a physical idiosyncrasy, he explodes his subjects, capturing a hidden truth that was hitherto unseen. Steadman portrayed bloodsucking business men, corruptible politicians, dollar drugged gamblers, transmogrified into reptiles or sharp-beaked birds. In the ferocious stroke of a few simple lines he expresses all the negative facets of the human condition to a terrifyingly hilarious degree.

Kurt Vonnegut's words seem to summarize perfectly the creative, dynamic and profound partnership of Steadman and Thompson: “Hunter's texts had inspired what were arguably the most passionately communicative illustrations Ralph had ever made. Yes, and they in turn had somehow made Hunter's texts seem even more entertaining and theatrical and exciting than they would have been without them” (Vonnegut xviii). Ralph Steadman and Hunter S. Thompson's legendary collaboration started a new style of reportage that symbolized the times and captured the imagination of a generation. In a letter to Hunter Thompson Steadman perfectly captured the role he played in their partnership: “I am the one you needed when you needed someone to say what cannot be said in words”.<sup>4</sup>

It is difficult to resist the conclusion that Steadman's illustrations constitute an exceptional resolution to Thompson's texts, make them richer and deeper. The illustrator's comic distortions point up moral lessons, communicate the themes and motifs of Thompson's stories and intensify the reader's reactions to the journalist's writings. Steadman's drawings are an interesting addenda to the narratives and are as much a part of the books and cultural mythology as Thompson's words.

3 Compare George Grosz and Otto Dix's drawings during the Weimar Republic Years in Germany after the Second World War.

4 <http://www.abebooks.com/blog/index.php/2011/03/23/hunter-s-thompson-and-ralp-steadman-letters/>



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